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retro GAMER

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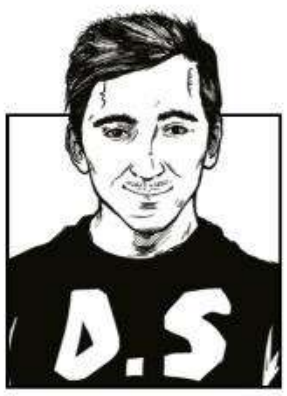
THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE NEO GEO GAME?

DARRAN JONES

While I love shmups, *Shock Troopers* is my favourite. I bought it as soon as it appeared on the Switch eShop.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls, a SNES-loving cousin and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *Devil May Cry 3: Special Edition*
Favourite game of all time: *Strider*



DREW SLEEP

It's gotta be *Metal Slug*, right? There was a coin-op in Kidderminster's swimming baths and it was literally the best thing about that entire town.
Expertise: Longboards, bandannas and *Final Fantasy*
Currently playing: *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*
Favourite game of all time: *Final Fantasy VIII*

NICK THORPE

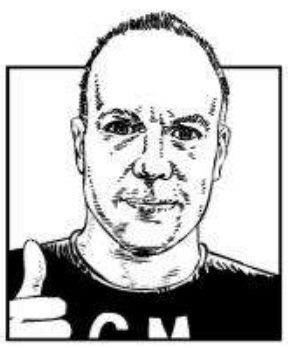
I just love everything about *The King Of Fighters '98* - plenty of characters, great backgrounds, memorable music. Of course, tomorrow I might change my mind and say *Neo Turf Masters* or *Mark Of The Wolves*…
Expertise: Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III
Currently playing: *Dirt 5*
Favourite game of all time: *Sonic The Hedgehog*

ANDY SALTER

I don't think I ever played a Neo Geo in my life… why would I? The games were £120+ and I didn't have a paper round. I did play *Samurai Shodown* on the Mega CD if that helps.
Expertise:
Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently playing:
STALKER: Anomaly
Favourite game of all time:
Rome: Total War

PAUL DRURY

The *Metal Slug* series is of course wonderful but I have a very soft spot for the extreme frisbee action of *Windjammers*, a brilliant reimagining of *Pong*.
Expertise: Anime cross-stitch
Currently playing: *Little Hope*
Favourite game of all time:
Sheep In Space



GRAEME MASON

I always gravitate towards the *Metal Slug* games, specifically the bonkers *Metal Slug 2*.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Until Dawn*
Favourite game of all time:
Resident Evil 4

RORY MILNE

I know it's the obvious choice, but I can't look past *Metal Slug*. Its over-the-top weapons, army of disposable opponents and cartoon violence deliver wanton destruction with a great big smile.
Expertise: The game I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Tau Ceti*
Favourite game of all time:
Tempest

DAVID CROOKES

Samurai Shodown II. With its smooth animation and focus on sheer fun it was a vast improvement on the original.
Expertise: Amstrad, Lynx, adventures, *Dizzy*, and PlayStation 2 (but is it retro? Debate!)
Currently playing: *Yakuza*
Favourite game of all time:
Broken Sword

MARTYN CARROLL

The first *Metal Slug* is the obvious choice, but my most played is easily *NAM-1974*, which plays like *Cabal* on an extreme sugar rush.
Expertise: Sinclair stuff
Currently playing: *Lonely Mountains: Downhill*
Favourite game of all time:
Jet Set Willy

Few consoles say luxury like the Neo Geo AES. I was constantly promised by various adverts, publishers and game reviews that the new game I was looking forward to was going to be 'arcade perfect' but they rarely ever were. The Advanced Entertainment System was different though. Here was a system that was identical to the arcade experience, because it *was* the arcade experience, with the only real difference being differently sized cartridges and packaging for home use.

While we've looked at the system in the past, this has been the first time we've been able to peek under the hood and get insight about the specifications and hardware from the developers that worked on the MVS and AES. It highlights not only how capable the developers were, but just how ambitious SNK was in its approach to both the arcade and the home market. Little wonder it proudly boasted that its console was "A quantum leap forward in video entertainment".

If consoles sporting arcade perfect games aren't your thing there's plenty more to enjoy, including an evolution of Sensible Software's *Wizball*, articles on *Seymour*, *The Simpsons* and *Sabre Wulf*, as well as an N64 buying guide based on titles I managed to pick up pre-lockdown. Oh and please look out for our excellent new subs offer on page 28, which features a great new gift that would look fantastic on your wall.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

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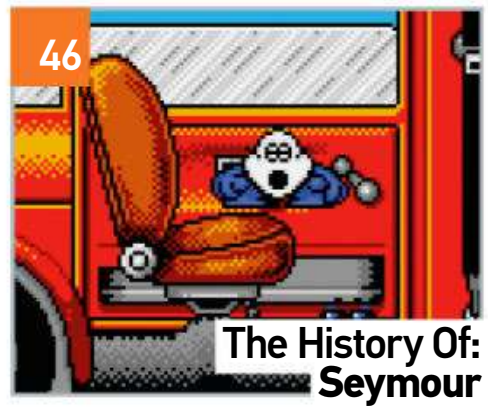
Ultimate Guide: The Simpsons

Take to the streets of Springfield and beat its residents up with help from Alan Wen



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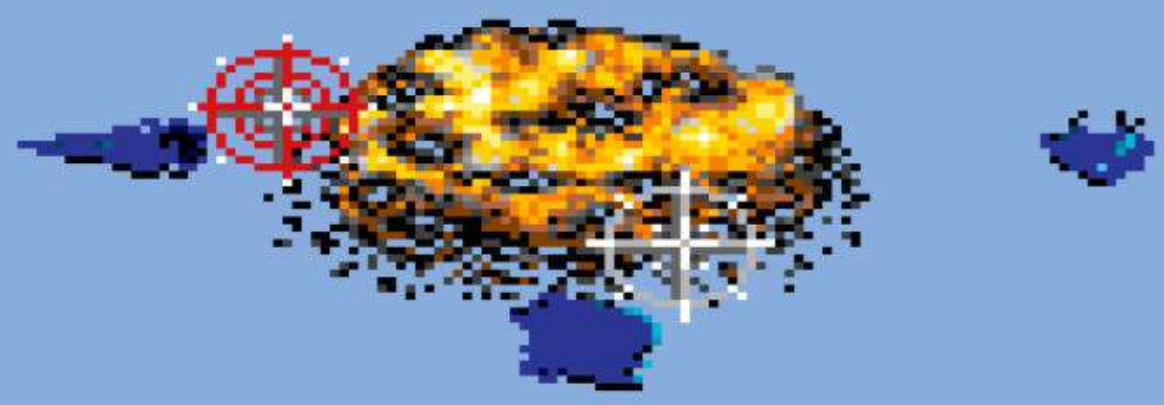

» [Mega Drive] *Nuclear Rush* is an uncomplicated shoot-'em-up distinguished primarily by its early VR support.

VIRTUAL REALITY GETS A VIRTUAL REVIVAL

Video Game History Foundation shows us what Sega VR could have been

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14 BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES
Time travelling is dangerous stuff. That's why we leave it to Nick, as he has moves that would make Doc Brown blush

Back in 1993, Sega Of America was planning an ambitious virtual reality headset for the Genesis. It would track your head movements like a modern VR unit, it would support a variety of games, and it would cost just $200. Avid Sega fans will know that no such unit was ever released, but this wasn't just talk – Sega had actually shown off this device at CES in the summer of 1993, and at least four games were in development. This year the Video Game History Foundation (VGHF) was able to use source code for the game *Nuclear Rush*, provided by the programmer Kenneth Hurley, to not only build a playable version of the game but adapt an emulator to provide VR support. To find out more about this revival of a lost peripheral, we spoke to VGHF co-directors Frank Cifaldi and Kelsey Lewin.

"A friend of ours, Dylan Mansfield from Gaming Alexandria, had been in contact with the programmer of the game and as far as I know was asking about his unfinished work," says Frank. "He managed to find, among other things, the original source code for this game *Nuclear Rush* on a CD that he had burned way back – it was his own personal backup of his work – and he put it up on GitHub." This was the first step towards reviving the game, but Frank points out that it wasn't in a playable state. "It was literally his raw code and the raw art assets that the artists on his team had generated."

At this point, Dylan got in touch with the VGHF as he was aware of the foundation's past work with old source code. "Rich Whitehouse, our head of digital conservation, is very familiar with the Mega Drive architecture and had worked with Mega Drive source code before, commercially and for us, and he dove right in," Frank continues. "We

» [Mega Drive] The compiled game features a variety of stages set across the lawless future USA.

» [Mega Drive] The story takes place in the distant year of 2032, when fossil fuel supplies have been totally exhausted.

» [Mega Drive] Stage introductions serve to tell you where you are, because what you do is obvious – destroy enemies.

» [Mega Drive] Enemy vehicles can attack from the air and the ground, and have a 3D appearance.

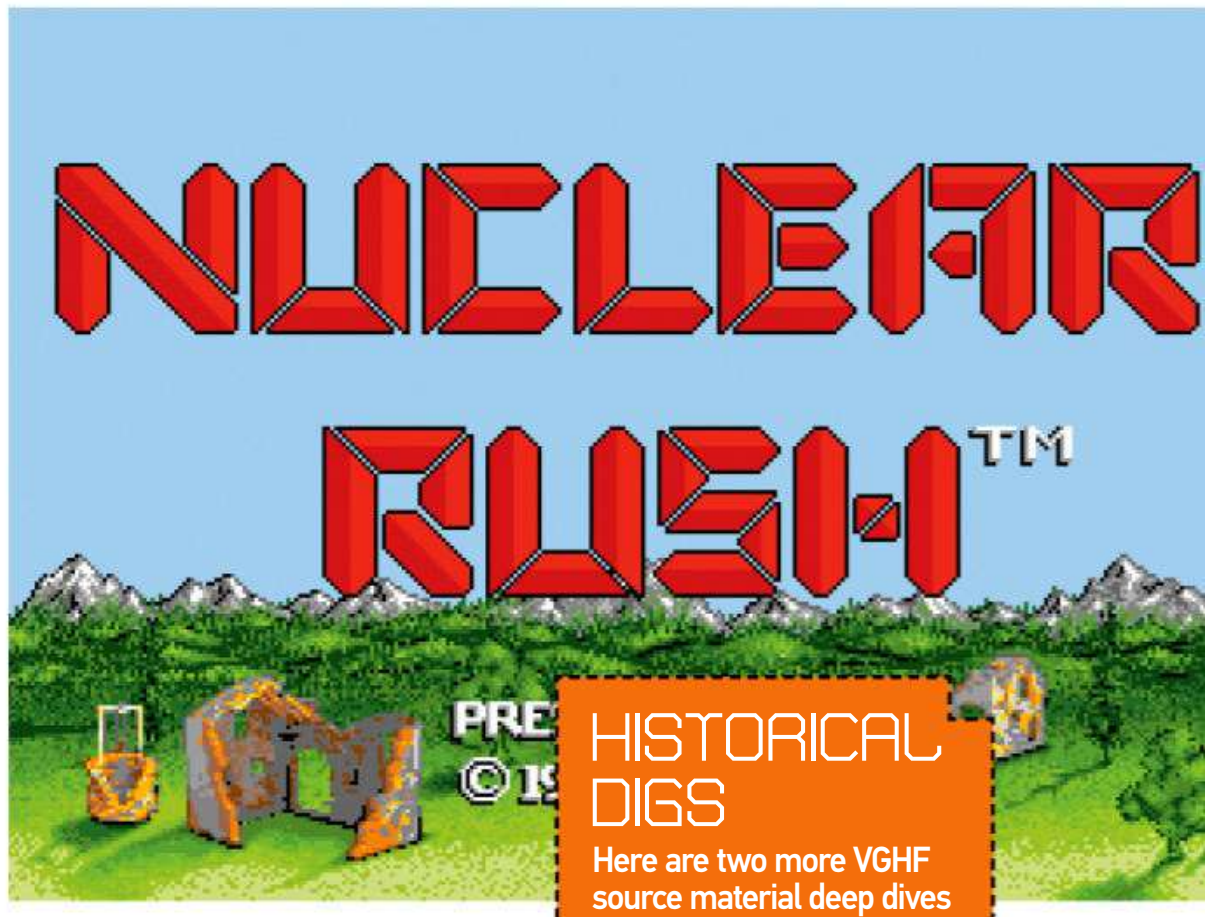
were talking about it and I was like 'man, it would be really cool if we could completely revive the Sega VR headset, it would be amazing if we could figure out how this thing worked just by looking at this guy's source code'. Long story short, Rich did his Rich magic and a couple of days later he was like 'I got it working!'. He used an open source emulator and he delivered a branch of it that emulated, at least partially, a Sega VR headset using a standard d-pad." At that point, the foundation purchased a VR headset to allow Rich to further develop VR support.

While *Nuclear Rush* itself is a fairly simple blaster, the resurrection of

» [PC] The lost room from *The Secret Of Monkey Island* looks pretty cool, but features little interaction – one potential reason for its removal.

a lost piece of gaming hardware is truly remarkable. In Frank's opinion, it's also indicative of the value of source materials. "I didn't suspect when we started this project that reviving a piece of hardware that we can't actually touch would be part of that, but that's the magic of getting at source, I suppose." One of the VGHF's ongoing projects is The Video Game Source Project, which aims to promote the study of videogame source materials. "Source and the games themselves are almost two entirely separate things – you will in theory have the ability to build the game out of the source, but you also have access to a lot of other things that could potentially be very historically interesting," says Kelsey. "You can see a lot of this with *Monkey Island*. Just being able to play *Monkey Island* doesn't give you access to understanding the game's development, what sort of thoughts went into creating the game, and even sometimes what ideas did or didn't work out."

This point was proven during a recent talk session with Ron Gilbert looking back at the game, and the VGHF website shows off plenty of unused art including a long-lost



» [Mega Drive] The nuclear rush is much like the gold rush, except with radioactive waste instead of shiny metal.

room that was once seen in a news report on Lucasfilm Games. Rather than chasing romanticised visions of what might have been, these explorations are designed to promote greater understanding. "The stuff that we're digging up, this isn't Ron's true vision that he couldn't realise 30 years ago. It's stuff that got cut for good reasons, and having access to the source and the people that made it, we can explain what these cuts were and why they were cut," says Frank. "We're sort of demystifying the game development process a little bit," Kelsey adds. "You can kind of show that it's actually OK that this isn't in the game."

For those of you wondering how you can support the organisation in its goals, financial support from one-off donors and Patreon supporters keep it going. For US-based readers, the VGHF is also planning to improve how it harnesses volunteer power, as a lot of its work can only be done on site. If neither of those options are within your means, you might still have some valuable information to contribute, including a surprising request from Kelsey. "Photographs of conventions, and even game stores – those sort of ephemeral snapshots of the way the world was at any given time. Did you take a Polaroid with you to CES in the Nineties? We need those!" You can read more about *Nuclear Rush* and the Video Game History Foundation's other projects at the website gamehistory.org.

HISTORICAL DIGS

Here are two more VGHF source material deep dives

DAYS OF THUNDER

Using source code from floppy disks loaned by the family of the late programmer Chris Oberth, a complete working version of an unreleased NES *Days Of Thunder* game was compiled. This was a complex process that involved working with files encrypted using very old software, split over many disks, and it ultimately required a volunteer to put together hardware of the appropriate vintage. From there, data had to be located from a variety of different disk sets to build the game correctly.

ALADDIN

Through examination of the source materials for *Aladdin*, including source code and art, Rich Whitehouse was able to find plenty of unused content from Virgin's classic Mega Drive game. A variety of lost enemies including a sword swallower, a prisoner and Iago on stilts were found and re-implemented in the game. A design document was also found, revealing unrealised plans such as more enemy types, a rock-paper-scissors minigame and a Mega-CD version of the game with exclusive extra levels.

SNK®

» It remains to be seen if the change of ownership will affect SNK's overall business strategy and development operations.

SNK CHANGES HANDS

The MiSK Foundation has purchased 33.3% of the shares of SNK Corporation, developer of series such as *The King Of Fighters* and *Samurai Shodown*, with an agreement to later buy 17.7% to become the company's majority shareholder. This has been met with mixed reception as the MiSK Foundation is headed by Mohammed bin Salman, crown prince of Saudi Arabia, who has promoted domestic reforms while making controversial international interventions. The purchase is seen by some as a move to increase Saudi Arabia's international reputation through popular culture, as with the country's high profile WWE events in recent years.

SUPERMAN SAVED

Back in 2000, Blue Sky Software was working on *Superman* for the PlayStation – a revised and improved version of the infamously bad N64 game. However, the publisher's licence expired that year and wasn't renewed, ultimately ensuring that the game was cancelled. Now a late development build has surfaced online, via a collector who purchased the disc in 2013. Bizarrely, the game was made available via a now deleted post on DeviantArt, in which the collector explained how he had seemingly destroyed his copy of the game, before retrieving a backup from an old hard disk using a recovery program.

» [PlayStation] Unlike the N64 *Superman* game, the PlayStation prototype feels like a pretty decent effort.

SMASH GETS SMASHED

NINTENDO ACTS TO PREVENT ONLINE MELEE TOURNAMENT

The *Super Smash Bros* tournament scene has long had a strained relationship with Nintendo, and a new dispute has erupted over the annual tournament The Big House. The traditional event had been cancelled in July due to the ongoing pandemic situation, but an online tournament was then scheduled for December 2020.

In order to host the perennially popular *Super Smash Bros Melee* online, the organisers were planning to use the Dolphin emulator with the Slippi mod for rollback netcode. Nintendo has always taken a dim view of unauthorised emulation and anything that resembles piracy, and unsurprisingly sent a cease and desist letter. The entire event, including the perfectly legal *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* tournament, was cancelled as a result. Players quickly responded with a #FreeSmash campaign online in an attempt to reverse the decision, but Nintendo has been unmoved. Player pressure did successfully reverse the company's attempts to prevent the live streaming of a *Super Smash Bros Melee* tournament at Evo 2013, but that was an event that used real hardware and raised money for charity – Nintendo will see this as a simple issue of stopping piracy. Maybe the company should consider a modern port with online play? It could solve many problems.

» [GameCube] Holding a *Super Smash Bros Melee* tournament offline is fine, but Nintendo won't tolerate emulation.

» Allegations regarding Billy Mitchell's actions now extend far beyond potential foul play in competitive gaming.

» The current management of Twin Galaxies now finds itself embroiled in a battle with the former management.

TWIN GALAXIES

SCORE DISPUTE HEATS UP

TWIN GALAXIES MAKES NEW ALLEGATIONS AGAINST BILLY MITCHELL AND WALTER DAY

Billy Mitchell's ongoing defamation lawsuit against Twin Galaxies regarding his high scores on *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* has taken a new turn. Twin Galaxies has now filed a counterclaim alleging that both Billy Mitchell and Walter Day engaged in a "decades-long pattern of abuse, impropriety, nepotism, and fraud", amounting to various crimes including breach of contract, deceit, unfair competition and more. Specific claims include allegations that Mitchell and Day used company money to pay personal debts, and sold the assets of the company under false pretences. It also states that, "Billy Mitchell lacked the requisite natural skill or ability to be the greatest videogame player of all time," and that the pair suppressed other players' *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* scores in order to portray Mitchell as the world's greatest gamer, so as to "restore Old Twin Galaxies to prominence and increase the value of the business assets for potential future suitors".

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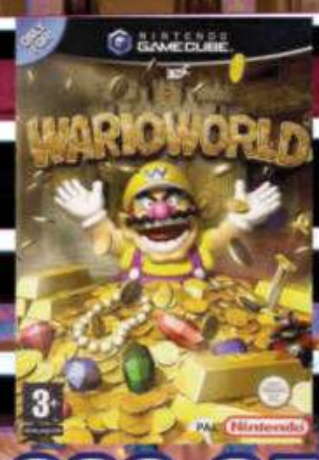

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Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance broadcaster who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. Join him as he hosts a phone-in show and plays games at www.twitch.tv/iainlee and also check out www.patreon.com/iainlee.

You Are Not Alone

My name is Iain and I am a retro gaming addict. I thought I was unique. I self isolated. No one understood me. But it doesn't have to be that way, there is an alternative! You can be a retro gaming addict (or RGA) in the company of other individuals who have the same condition. Obviously we have the mighty **Retro Gamer** to comfort us. But we can also chat with others afflicted, watch them as they indulge their sickness, and get comfort knowing we are not alone.

Basically, what I'm trying to tell you is there are loads of retro heads like you and me online and it's really cool watching them play and even becoming part of their community. I love it and I suspect some of you will too. Here are a few of the people who have caught my attention because they're funny, warm humans who want to share their love of old games with as many people as possible. All of these streamers are on twitch.tv and this isn't even the tip of the iceberg, just my personal faves today.

First up is Mr_Zadok. This guy is so chilled, it's like a videogaming ASMR. Sometimes I'm the only person watching him and he seems genuinely thrilled that I'm there, although I suspect he's equally happy playing on his own. He LOVES the *Ultima* games but a quick look at his recent play throughs shows he's just completed *The Addams Family* on the NES and *Super Pitfall*. This is a really gentle streamer I enjoy watching, who always comes across as such a lovely guy, so give him a watch.

RetroFaithKnuckles is a Sega head and I love arguing with her about who has the best Dreamcast set up. It's her by a country mile but I still love the fights! What's great about Faith is she really knows her gaming onions. She has some beautiful consoles and peripherals and is happy to talk you through them. I was first attracted to her because she was playing *Phantasy Star Online* actually online via her GameCube. I didn't even know this was possible!

Last for now is the mighty BlaqMario. I should stress he is most definitely not safe for work! He dresses up as Mario, has a potty mouth and is perhaps the most excitable man on the internet. Honestly, his set up is incredible. You can watch him for the games (a lot of *Mario Kart* gets played here) or to look at his incredible collection of gear. It must have cost him a fortune.

What I really dig about all these people is that in their own way, they are breathing life into games and consoles, some of which are over 30 years old. It really is a joy to sit back and watch others play these games in a safe, friendly environment. Maybe it's COVID restrictions, maybe it's old age but being in the company of like-minded gamers, even virtually, gives me a warm feeling. I may be physically alone, but spiritually I have made lots of lovely connections.

> "It really is a joy to sit back and watch others play these games in a safe, friendly environment"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

Send me to Valhalla

I've recently had cause to reflect upon one of my favourite classic games of all time, while playing a brand-new game that shares some common elements. To wit: two games separated by 37 years, but linked by a title; *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, and… well, *Valhalla*, the classic ZX Spectrum graphic adventure, released in 1983 by the long-forgotten Legend. On the surface, they don't appear to have a great deal in common, beyond the Viking-flecked setting, and appearances from a grab-bag of Norse gods.

One had a text interface – the classic 'Eat food'/'Go East' parser – while the other is almost entirely action-based, the player afforded direct control over their character. Presented together, they're as good an example as any of how far gaming has come since its formative years. If created today, *Valhalla* would probably be very similar to *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, or *God Of War*. As crude as it may appear now, it was heralded as a truly groundbreaking game. While not quite open world, it still managed to give the player more freedom than most games of the era.

One of the things I love about the *Assassin's Creed* series is that you can more or less play it your way. You can follow the story… or just break out on your own and explore. Rightly or wrongly, *Valhalla* – the 1983 model – also afforded players this luxury. Or, at least, let you run riot in the margins of what you were supposed to be doing (some guff about collecting six mythical objects).

Valhalla, despite its flat visuals, its stick-man characters, its limited vocabulary, its basic colour palette, its boxy castles, and basic storyline, was one of the first games where I felt free. I never finished it, in part because I spent most of my time in that world telling my character to throw food or helmets at Thor, and typing in swear words, just so Mary The Dwarf would march on the screen and punch me in the nethers. "Mary is not amused…" is one of the all-time great videogame quotes, and I would buy any t-shirt featuring it.

Additionally, somehow the world actually felt real and sprawling. The visuals – by virtue of the skant resources that were available – had a desolation about them. Though characters just wandered around from screen to screen, seemingly without aim, I really bought into the soggy, misty, atmosphere that was clearly the creators' intent.

I've always found this fascinating about the progress of gaming; how a nearly 40-year-old game, put together by a handful of people on hardware with less processing power than a Furby, can feel as atmospheric as a brand-new one, developed by hundreds of people, with a budget in the tens of millions. I marvel at how the human brain can fill in the blanks, create its own atmosphere and expand a game far beyond the limits of what's actually there. While it doesn't exactly hold up today, in the context of those early-Eighties halcyon days, I enjoyed *Valhalla* just as much as I'm enjoying *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*.

> "One of the things I love about the Assassin's Creed series is that you can more or less play it your way"

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

Clubbing against COVID

Andy Palmer explains how Arcade Club is tackling the pandemic

As the UK continues to be affected by COVID-19, museums and entertainment venues like Arcade Club, continue to suffer due to a lack of visitors. Andy Palmer tells us about the struggles his popular arcade venues have faced in 2020 and how the future looks.

How badly has Arcade Club been affected by COVID-19?
Like most businesses operating in the hospitality space, we've been hit incredibly hard, with visitors numbers vastly reduced, but all the associated costs of running our venues remaining the same. It's been an extremely difficult year, trying to keep our heads above water.

What precautions have you been taking to ensure your Bury and Leeds venues are COVID-safe?
The first thing was reducing those visitor numbers so we could maintain effective social distancing to those visiting the venue. We were one of the first arcades to close even before it was enforced because we take the safety of our staff and visitors so seriously, and we actually refrained from opening as soon as we could so we could ensure the highest level of safety precautions were in place, once we did. Booking systems, extra cleaning, sanitation stations around the venue, we did it all. During our first week of re-opening a nurse actually approached a staff member telling them just how impressed she was with our precautions, it was a great moment of validation for the team for the measures they'd put in place.

Have you been getting any help from the local councils?
We received a little help yes, through the different grants schemes offered by the government, and it was much appreciated. That being said, these grants are an off-the-peg scheme if you like, and while I must stress we appreciate everything afforded to us by our local councils, given the nature and size of our venues, and the associated running costs, it sadly amounted to a mere drop in the ocean.

Are there any concerns that your existing clubs could permanently close for good if lockdowns continue in 2021?
It's a concern that's been in the forefront of our minds from day one. The uncertainty that COVID-19 has unleashed on the entire industry has meant that we've had to plan for the very worst of scenarios. While we fully agree with the measures that have been implemented in the interest of keeping the public safe, what they have sadly meant, is that for most of the year, we've had no way of generating any income, and when we have been open, that income has been vastly reduced. Unfortunately no business can survive for long under such conditions.

» Andy Palmer is the owner of Arcade Club and started it using machines from his own personal collection.

Outside of COVID-19 and the Blackpool planning issues, have you experienced any other challenges this year?
Tempering expectations for the growth of the company over the next 12-18 months has been a challenge. We're always planning for the future, so to suddenly have the brakes put on and accept that we can't do a lot of the things we'd planned has been hard. That being said, we're acutely aware that everyone is in the same boat, and it's sadly just one of this things.

Would you consider setting up fundraisers in order to keep both venues going?
It's something we would consider yes, but only as a final resort. We take great pride in our independence as a business and so we'd be keen to avoid doing so if we can.

Are you still picking up new machines to attract gamers in?
It would appear so on the surface, but given the nature of how we acquire our machines, orders that were put in pre-COVID are just arriving now, so while we aren't actively picking up new games, new games are arriving!

If readers can't visit Arcade Club, what can they do to help?
With Christmas coming up, a gift voucher purchase from our website (arcadeclub.co.uk) is both a fantastic gift for that gamer in your life and of course, means we can generate a little income while we aren't able to open. The vouchers are good for use indefinitely, and I'm sure everyone will be ready to play all their favourite arcade games when we finally do return to normality.

» The Bury Arcade Club is set across several floors and is filled with some incredible arcade games.

» Arcade Club has been doing everything it can to ensure it stays COVID-secure.

» Arcade Club Leeds was the second venue to open. A third in Blackpool had been planned for earlier this year.

» Here's a pre-COVID shot of the Bury Arcade Club. Can you spot Nick hiding in the photo?

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

FEBRUARY 2004 – All of the holiday madness has subsided, the games that just missed Christmas are out, so what are we left with? Well, Sony has a new console out if you're tempted – but you may not be. Time travel enthusiast Nick Thorpe investigates

NEWS FEBRUARY 2004

On 4 February, a social networking website known as TheFacebook launched for Harvard University students in the USA. Coded by Mark Zuckerberg, who had also been involved with the competing HarvardConnection.com site, TheFacebook had 1,500 users after just 24 hours and after a month expanded to additional American universities. Today, the site – now known simply as Facebook – has 2.7 billion active users, and achieved a peak market capitalisation of $866 billion in August 2020.

At least 21 cockle pickers died at Morecambe Bay in Lancashire on 5 February, having been drowned by the incoming tide. All of the workers were undocumented immigrants, illegally trafficked into the UK from China, and lacked sufficient knowledge of English to understand the warnings of local cockle pickers. Gangmaster Lin Liang Ren was sentenced to 12 years for manslaughter and a further two years for conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, but was released and deported after just seven years.

The 76th Academy Awards took place in Hollywood on 29 February. The night was dominated by *The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King*, which joined *Ben Hur* and *Titanic* in the record books by winning 11 awards. The film won every award it was nominated for, including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Visual Effects. Other winners included Sean Penn, who won Best Actor for his role in *Mystic River*, and Charlize Theron, who took Best Actress for *Monster*.

De-emphasising the games to promote multimedia – could PSX be a glimpse of Sony's approach to the PS3?

THE LATEST NEWS FROM FEBRUARY 2004

A new Sony console is usually cause for some fanfare, but most of the press gave little coverage to the recent Japanese release of the PSX – a multimedia set-top box incorporating digital video recording, DVD playback and PS2 game support. Only *Edge* seemed particularly interested in the new console, which it felt could be "a marker for the direction in which Sony wants to take its PlayStation brand". The system was assessed as "clearly targeted at families, or partnerships where the female dictates what enters the living room" with *Edge* stating that "Sony hopes they'll come for movies and stay for games". While the impression of the hardware was broadly positive, Edge cautioned that "you'd be silly to import a PSX now, if only because a PAL version is just around the corner". This was a corner that we ultimately never turned, as the PSX was never released outside of Japan.

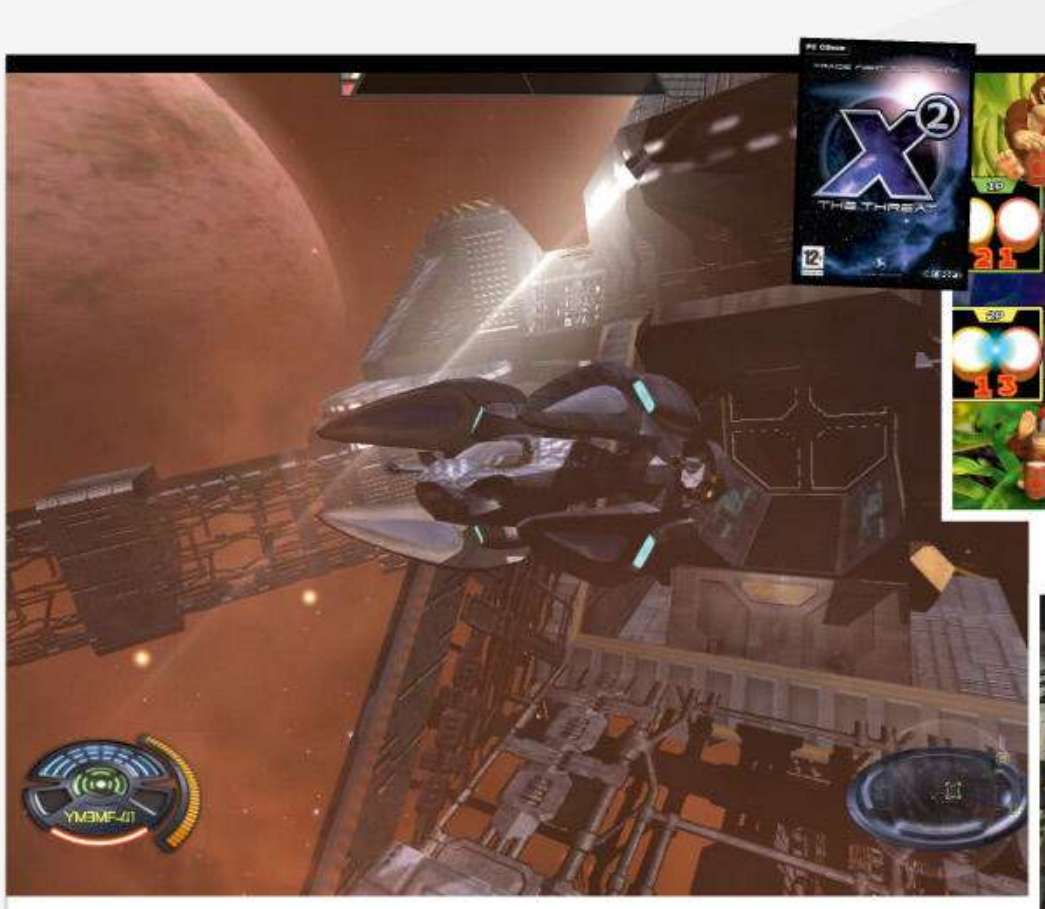
Top billing for the month goes to *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, launching on PC and Xbox. *XBM* was more than a little keen on the first-person action-RPG sequel, declaring it "the game of the year, yes, even this early on" in a 10/10 review. The reviewer was taken with the freedom offered by the game, stating that "everything you will see is a physical object. All creatures, people and robots have their own artificial intelligence. The stage is set, the actors are in place and how you act is up to you". *Edge* felt that it was "a very fine game spread too thin", scoring it 7/10. "Shoot a fellow Tarsus agent in the face with a tranq dart because she's getting in your way and neither the game nor the lady herself will remember it the next time you meet", the reviewer lamented. "It's a game that's made the effort to name the cat in the secretary's desk photo but not to make the jumping work properly."

Many of February's other releases were pretty low-key, but there were some multi-format big hitters out there. Dungeons & Dragons fans had the delights of *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II* to enjoy on PS2 and Xbox, which scored a solid 7/10 in both *games™* and *Edge*, with the former calling it "a basic button basher at heart" and the latter describing it as "a confidently realised *Gauntlet* remake". *Project Zero 2* earned 81%

INVISIBLE WAR
Order Seeker: We are so fortunate that Her Holiness found us before Dumier could invade our spirits with such ruthless and selfish competition.

[Xbox] *Deus Ex: Invisible War* promised much, but the execution definitely left something to be desired.

[PS2] A good *Gauntlet* remake sounds pretty simple by 2004 standards, but we're actually up for that idea today.



[PC] If you like your space trading hands-off, *X²: The Threat* is probably the game for you.

[GameCube] In the pre-*Guitar Hero* world, novelty plastic instruments made for some unique releases.

[Xbox] Here's a lovely press shot, which makes the game look pretty while failing to convey the gameplay experience.

in *Play*, which felt that "Tecmo has effectively played it safe" with the camera-driven horror sequel, while *Edge* scored it 7/10, complaining that the excellence of the atmosphere and story "throws harsh light on the conventions we accept without question in lesser titles". Third-person shooter *Max Payne 2* made its arrival on PS2 and Xbox, scoring 68% in *Play*, which felt that it was "linear and bland". *XBM* was more impressed, giving it 8/10 and calling it "a solid, well scripted game that delivers on its promises".

GameCube owners once again found themselves looking towards the import scene, this month thanks largely to the bonkers bongo action of *Donkey Konga*. The game scored 88% in *NGC*, with Geraint Evans cautioning that "the music currently provided in the Japanese version won't be to everyone's tastes", but asserting that the concept was so solid that "anyone, no matter their age or gaming taste, will have a great deal of fun". *Cube* found that the game had "managed to win over the most snub-nosed of critics in our office", and scored it 9.2/10. The GameCube to Game Boy Advance link cable received its own peripheral showcase in the form of *Pac-Man Vs*, which gave one Game Boy Advance-using player the task of avoiding their TV-bound ghost friends. *Cube* gave it 8.8/10, saying that the asymmetrical multiplayer was "just too devious to be left for more than a few minutes", but noting that a large part of the game's appeal was its inclusion as a freebie. *NGC* felt similarly, scoring the game 80% – a better score than *R: Racing Evolution*, the game it was bundled with, which it felt "would be loads better" had it been 20% faster.

On PC, the ambitious space trading simulator *X²: The Threat* divided opinions. *PC Gamer* felt that it "rewards a patient, dogged building-up of resources, a hamster-like hoarding of credits", but that *Freelancer* was a more suitable game for fans of dogfighting. The game scored 87%, with Craig Pearson advising readers to "play it like you've made a lifestyle choice". Less impressed was *games™*, which complained that the game's efficient autopilot "reduces the game to a dirge of menu surfing", but noting that it became more enjoyable once you started managing an armada. The game scored 5/10 overall, condemned as featuring "an almost intolerable lack of personality that undermines its exciting promise".

A final thought for the month – it's always disconcerting when a major game makes it to release without the press having had a chance to review it, so it'll be very interesting indeed to see how this month's chart-busting success *Sonic Heroes* fares in the magazines next month. Join us next time to find out, won't you?

CHARTS

JANUARY 2004

PLAYSTATION 2

1 – Sonic Heroes (Sega)
2 – Mafia (Take 2)
3 – Need For Speed: Underground (EA)
4 – The Simpsons: Hit & Run (Vivendi)
5 – Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II (Acclaim)

XBOX

1 – Sonic Heroes (Sega)
2 – Grand Theft Auto: Double Pack (Take 2)
3 – Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II (Acclaim)
4 – Project Gotham Racing 2 (Microsoft)
5 – Legacy Of Kain: Defiance (Eidos)

GAMECUBE

1 – Sonic Heroes (Sega)
2 – Mario Kart: Double Dash!! (Nintendo)
3 – The Simpsons: Hit & Run (Vivendi)
4 – Mario Party 5 (Nintendo)
5 – Need For Speed: Underground (EA)

MUSIC

1 – With A Little Help From My Friends (Sam & Mark)
2 – She Believes (In Me) (Ronan Keating)
3 – Take Me To The Clouds Above (LMC vs U2)
4 – Milkshake (Kelis)
5 – Moviestar (Stereophonics)

THIS MONTH IN...

games™

New Zealand's Media Classification Office has banned *Manhunt*, with chief censor Bill Hastings describing it as "a game where the only thing you do is kill everyone you see". The magazine suggests a revision could be in the works, as a *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* voice line was removed after complaints by the Haitian community.

Edge

The Infinium Labs Phantom is doing the rounds again, and *Edge* is unconvinced by the marketing promise of a configurable PC-style system in a console-style box. "This 'build to order' concept, where consumers are allowed to specify their own machine, throws the whole ethos of a one-box solution into confusion," says the magazine.

PC Gamer

"GRAPHICS 1971-2004 REST IN PC," screams the page in full caps lock fury. Graphics are dead – Jason Rubin said so at the European Game Developers Conference. "I found myself playing the original *Half-Life*," said Kieron Gillen, putting this idea to the test. "And, frankly, it looked perfectly acceptable." Well, that's that case closed, then. Cool.

Space Panic

DON'T PANIC, IT'S JUST BROKEN

» ColecoVision » 1983 » Coleco

I've recently moved house, and to be honest the experience was entirely unpleasant. I'm happy to have much more space than I did before, but as a person who accumulates material possessions and had become somewhat disorganised, I found that boxing everything up was a nightmare. I'd rather not have that experience again, so I've been carefully considering every item as I unpack in my new place – and one of the items that gave me pause was my copy of *Space Panic* for the ColecoVision, which doesn't work.

Space Panic wasn't the most popular game ever, but it's one of those games that sticks in my mind because of its historical importance. The original arcade game by Universal was an action game that was a significant step towards the development of the platform game, in that it featured various levels that the player could travel between by ladder, but didn't feature a jump button. The game also adopted the hole digging attacks from *Heiankyo Alien*, which required you to create a trap for the aliens (or mutant tomatoes, as I like to think of them) before filling it back in above them. Today the game feels a lot like a slower, simpler version of *Lode Runner*, but that's not how the arcade game would have been seen in 1980 – it would have been a wholly novel experience at the time. Having said that, it's also fascinating to think about how quickly the game began to feel dated. *Donkey Kong* developed on the platforms and ladders formula to include jumping and more direct attacks, and was famously the ColecoVision's flagship game. *Space Panic* is the older game, *Donkey Kong* arrived on the home console first, so it's easy to see how *Space Panic* could have been seen as underwhelming.

I've decided to keep the game. Apart from having a soft spot for those early arcade games, I now finally have adequate room to set up my soldering iron. I'm going to try to revive that old cartridge, and give it the love it deserves.

00 2UP 00

660 OXYGEN 2

INSIDE THE

NEO GEO

THE FUTURE IS NOW

WORDS BY NICK THORPE

WHETHER YOU KNOW IT AS THE ROLLS ROYCE OF HOME CONSOLES OR THE WORKHORSE THAT POWERED ARCADE CABINETS FOR OVER A DECADE, THE NEO GEO IS A PLATFORM THAT EVERY RETRO GAMER SHOULD BE FAMILIAR WITH. WE SPEAK TO VETERAN SNK DEVELOPERS TO FIND OUT WHAT MADE THIS POWERFUL PLATFORM TICK

YASUYUKI•ODA

Oda is a producer at SNK, and worked on *Fatal Fury*, *Art Of Fighting* and *The King Of Fighters* Neo Geo games.

Many pieces of gaming hardware have been described as 'legendary' over the years, but how many truly deserve such an accolade? You can argue the merits of various systems, but one that shouldn't attract much in the way of dissent is SNK's Neo Geo. Despite the fact that SNK has done an excellent job of making the Neo Geo library available across a variety of devices, the name is still uttered with a certain reverence because of the status it held in its prime. In the arcade, the Neo Geo MVS became a fixture thanks to its potent hardware and cheap game distribution model, but the legend of the Neo Geo is really built around the home console, the Neo Geo AES. Players who bought SNK's home console would never suffer from inferior home conversions of their favourite arcade games, as the console contained the exact same hardware as the arcade board. But such power comes at a price and the Neo Geo AES was firmly priced as a luxury item, to the point that even seeing one was a tall order – after all, who was going to pay over £100 for a single game? Nothing like it had ever existed before, and it's extremely unlikely that anything like it will ever exist again.

To learn how the Neo Geo hardware came to be, we have to look at SNK's arcade history. During the late Eighties the company had formed something of a partnership with Alpha Denshi Corporation, later known as ADK, which both developed games and designed hardware. This successful collaboration saw the two companies work together on games like *Time Soldiers* and *Gang Wars*, and represented a step forward for SNK's use of hardware. For years, the company had used arcade boards that relied on one or more 8-bit Zilog Z80 CPUs, but this new technology introduced the 16-bit Motorola 68000 as a main processor, with the Z80 relegated to driving sound – usually from a Yamaha sound chip. This was a common hardware configuration in the arcade world, but what was unusual was the way *Time Soldiers* and the games that followed it drew graphics, eschewing traditional ▶

NOBUYUKI•KUROKI

Kuroki is a game director today, and was an artist on *Art Of Fighting 2* and *Garou: Mark Of The Wolves*.

» [Neo Geo] Despite the system's sprite scaling capabilities, *Riding Hero* is unique as an into-the-screen Neo Geo racer.

» [Neo Geo] *The Ultimate 11* has a lot going on graphically, with plenty of sprites, scanline effects and heavy use of scaling.

» [Neo Geo] *League Bowling* was one of just a few early games to support linked cabinet multiplayer.

» [Neo Geo] Enormous sprites were a hallmark of early Neo Geo games, as seen here in *The Super Spy*.

UNDER·THE·HOOD

TAKE A LOOK AT THE CHIPS THAT MAKE UP THE NEO GEO

1

68000 CPU

■ This 16-bit CPU is a workhorse of the Eighties and Nineties, and was also found at slower speeds in the Atari ST, Amiga and Mega Drive. Though originally designed by Motorola, SNK typically used chips by other manufacturers like Toshiba.

2

Z80 CPU

■ Zilog's 8-bit chip was originally used as a main CPU in systems like the ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and Master System. However, by the late Eighties it was often used to drive sound in consoles like the Mega Drive, and that's the role it plays here.

3

LSPC-A0

■ This is the custom Line Sprite Processor chip that drives Neo Geo graphics. This is the first generation version, later replaced by the LSPC2-A2. Later, it was combined into all-in-one video display controller chips like the NEO-GRC2-F and NEO-GRZ.

4

000-L0

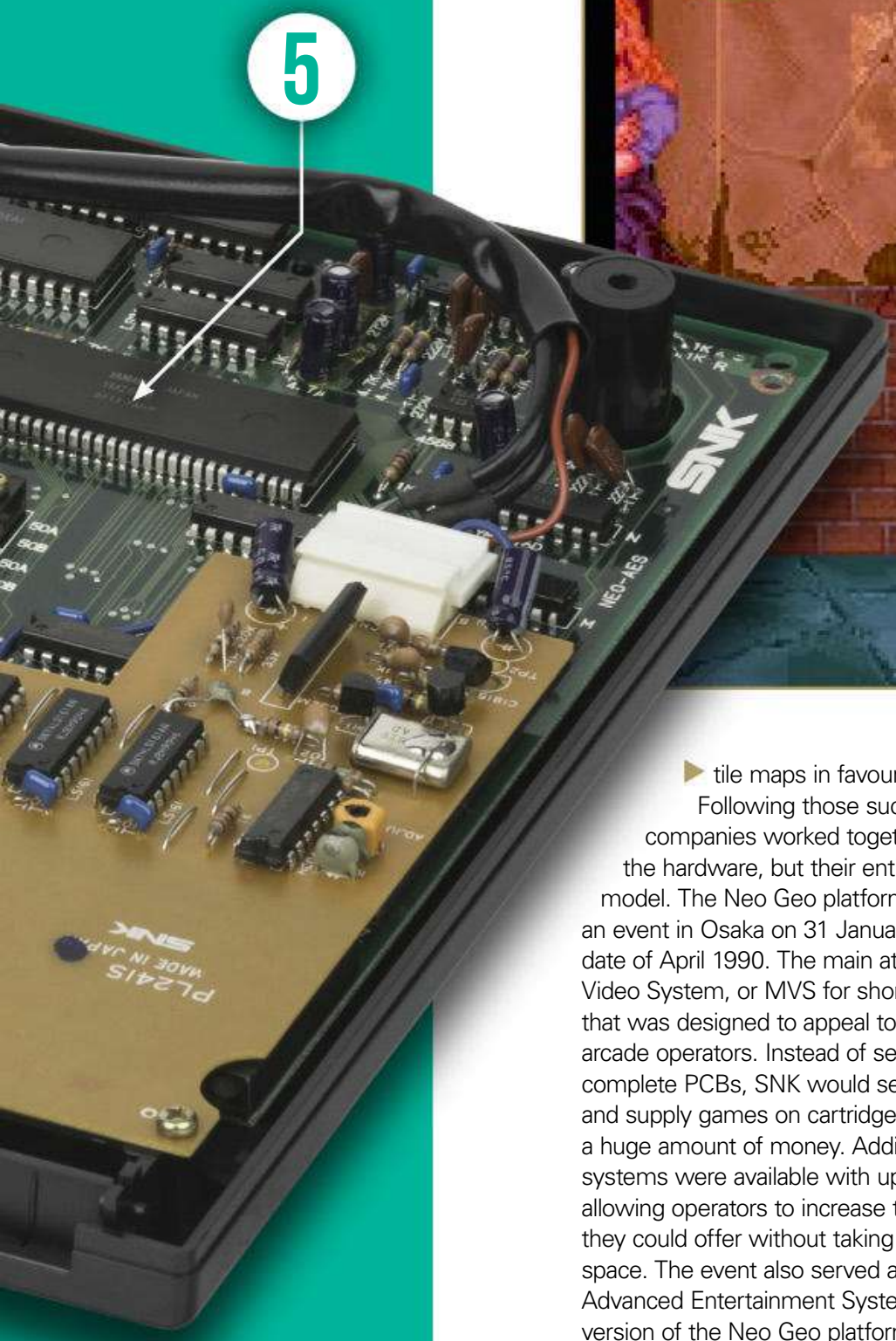
■ This ROM stores the lookup table for sprite shrinking values. The LSPC references this when performing scaling operations. In later systems such as the MV1C MVS motherboard, this was integrated into an all-in-one GPU labelled NEO-GRZ.

5

YM2610

■ This is the system's sound chip, manufactured by Yamaha. As costs were reduced, some versions of the MVS contained a complete audio subsystem on a single chip, combining this chip with the Z80 and RAM in a package labelled NEO-YSA2.

» [Neo Geo] Games like *Art Of Fighting* needed scaling – without it, the massive characters would have little room to move.



NEO-EPO

■ This is the BIOS for the console, a ROM chip containing all of the basic system functions. Home and arcade cartridges contain exactly the same code, and use the BIOS to determine whether they should run in MVS or AES mode.

tile maps in favour of sprite strips.

Following those successes, the two companies worked together to evolve not only the hardware, but their entire arcade business model. The Neo Geo platform was announced at an event in Osaka on 31 January 1990, with a release date of April 1990. The main attraction was the Multi Video System, or MVS for short – a new arcade board that was designed to appeal to budget conscious arcade operators. Instead of selling games as complete PCBs, SNK would sell MVS motherboards and supply games on cartridges, thus saving operators a huge amount of money. Additionally, Neo Geo MVS systems were available with up to six cartridge slots, allowing operators to increase the amount of games they could offer without taking up additional floor space. The event also served as the unveiling of the Advanced Entertainment System, a home console version of the Neo Geo platform that would be available exclusively as a rental item. This would play the same software, and a removable memory card would allow you to save progress in the arcade and continue at home, or vice versa.

Early games like *Nam-1975, Baseball Stars, Top Players Golf* and *Magician Lord* showed that the hardware was capable of shifting some enormous sprites and performing impressive sprite scaling, all while playing back high quality music and abundant voice clips. The only major feature that competitors could boast over SNK's offering was sprite rotation, but this did nothing to diminish the impression that the Neo Geo made. Given that it was impressive in the arcade, it was also clear that the Neo Geo AES would be a big step up compared to anything for sale in the home market at that time, comfortably besting the more mainstream Mega Drive and PC Engine consoles.

With that in mind, you might be surprised to learn that the Neo Geo isn't actually so far removed from the Mega Drive, in terms of the hardware that powers the console, but it makes a lot of sense when you consider that Sega also designed its console with its popular arcade hardware as a starting point. Both systems are powered by Motorola 68000 and Zilog Z80 CPUs, though the Neo Geo runs both faster – 12 MHz and 4 MHz respectively, compared to 7.67 MHz and 3.57 MHz on the Mega Drive. Both systems have 64KB of main RAM, but the Neo Geo has 84KB of video RAM compared to the Mega Drive's 64KB, the major differences come with the dedicated graphics and sound chips. Where the Mega Drive uses the Yamaha YM2612 for sound, the Neo Geo uses the more advanced YM2610.

The biggest differentiating factor is the Neo Geo's custom graphics chip, the Line Sprite Processor, an evolution of the sprite strip technology used in *Time Soldiers*. Most consoles and arcade boards used one or more tile map backgrounds, which had different properties to the objects on the sprite layer. For example, Mode 7 scaling and rotation on the SNES only applies to a single background layer, and can't be applied to sprites. The Neo Geo had a single

» The Neo Geo AES was the first home console to support removable memory cards, which were also compatible with MVS boards.

foreground tile map layer, known as the Fix layer, displayed above everything else and used for status bars, credit displays and the like. However, almost everything you'd see on the screen was drawn as a sprite, meaning that everything could be manipulated in exactly the same way. The Neo Geo could draw a huge number of sprites for the time, with 380 on-screen at any time. The system also had very strong colour capabilities. Each sprite could use one of 256 palettes of 16 colours, allowing games to display up to 3,840 colours on-screen from a total range of 65,536 colours. "Way back then we used our own self-developed pixel art tool called Art Box. We developed it specifically to make Neo Geo games, so naturally it was pretty convenient and easy to use," says Nobuyuki Kuroki, a veteran SNK artist whose work includes *Art Of Fighting 2*, *Real Bout Fatal Fury* and *Garou: Mark Of The Wolves*, as well as directorial duties on *Samurai Shodown* (2019).

> BOTH THE KING OF FIGHTERS AND KIZUNA ENCOUNTER SHARE THE SAME PROBLEM IN THAT THEY HAD TO BE SPECIFICALLY DESIGNED KEEPING IN MIND THAT CHARACTERS STANDING IN THE BACKGROUND WOULD RESULT IN A GAME WITH FEW PROCESSING RESOURCES TO SPARE
>
> **YASUYUKI•ODA**

What was unusual about the Neo Geo was that it defined sprites in vertical strips, always 16 pixels wide but up to 512 pixels tall, which could be joined together to make large moving objects. Huge sprites were a defining feature of early Neo Geo games, but this was actually harder to achieve than you may be aware. "Alright we're getting into technical territory here so bear with me," begins Kuroki. "So, the Neo Geo was incredibly adept at displaying vertical sprites thanks to its unique hardware and design. The *Art Of Fighting* games show this feature off rather well. However, horizontal sprites were difficult to work with as one sprite could only get so big until a phenomenon called 'sprite over' would cause that specific area to flicker." This was a hard limit of 96 sprites per scanline, with anything beyond that simply not drawn. "Incidentally, Billy Kane's staff and Tung Fu Rue's Giant Whirlwind Punch exceeded this limit, so instead we created different sprites for the hands and the tip of his cane and displayed them at the same time," says Kuroki, recalling some examples from the *Fatal Fury* series. That wasn't the only barrier that SNK's designers faced when it came to huge sprites, "It was exceedingly difficult to draw large characters. I imagine that if *Art Of Fighting* were to be re-drawn at a 4K resolution, that all the SNK artists would have quit," he adds with a laugh.

This horizontal sprite limit proved to be a constraint on the system's capabilities, with every additional layer of background detail adding to the horizontal limit. "Both *The King Of Fighters* and *Kizuna Encounter* share the same problem in that they had to be specifically designed keeping in mind that characters standing in the background would result in a game with few processing resources to spare," says Yasuyuki Oda, who drew art for Neo Geo games such as *Fatal Fury 3*, *Kizuna Encounter* and *The King Of Fighters '95*, and later became a director for *Real Bout Fatal Fury 2* and *Garou: Mark Of The Wolves*. "Additionally, *Kizuna Encounter*, with the game's ability to switch to another character on the fly, made it incredibly difficult to develop for hardware with low memory resources. By the way, the idea of *Kizuna Encounter*'s tag-team system came from professional wrestling tag-team matches."

One of the most impressive ways that sprites could be manipulated on the Neo Geo was through the use of scaling – since everything was drawn as sprites, this effect could be achieved across the whole screen. "We utilised sprite scaling quite often in *Art Of Fighting* and *Samurai Shodown*," says Kuroki. "This function that allowed characters to grow or shrink depending on the distance to their opponent was something very novel and refreshing. Additionally, I think many players were quite impressed by its quick transition from large to small sprites." The Neo Geo's support for scaling only allowed for sprites to be reduced in size, using pre-defined values that ensured the pixels would always disappear in a certain order. Since it couldn't enlarge sprites, all graphics had to be drawn at their maximum display size, but Kuroki says "I never considered its inability to enlarge sprites to be an issue." However, scaling did pose some wider challenges when it came to certain effects. "Scaling actually does not affect the sprite limit, but when it came to *Art Of Fighting,* we would layer an additional sprite over the faces of beaten up characters. We would then have to zoom in and out to make sure the two sprites were layered correctly on the face."

» [Neo Geo] Despite being the system's smallest game and a fairly simple one at that, *Puzzled* was 22 megabits in size.

Over time, the Neo Geo became best known for its fighting games as SNK concentrated on the genre, and in that genre the emphasis moved away from these signature features. Compare something like *SNK Vs Capcom: SVC Chaos* to an earlier game like *Art Of Fighting*, and you'll notice smaller sprites and an absence of that signature scaling effect. According to Oda, that's largely down to the way the fighting genre evolved. "When making a game, we have to take everything ranging from work efficiency and capacity to a game's speed into deep consideration. In a game like this that has quite a fast rate of gameplay, some players would have become dizzy with the constant zooming in and out," he explains. *Samurai Shodown* certainly had a relatively slow style of combat relative to the likes of *The King Of Fighters 2003*, so you can certainly see his point. However, games like the *Metal Slug* series continued to throw around enormous sprites, and the *Samurai Shodown* series retained its scaling effect to the very end.

The Neo Geo's sound chip, the Yamaha YM2610, was quite versatile. Musicians had three square wave channels for simple sound effects and four channels of FM synthesis, but what really made the Neo Geo stand out was its capability to use plenty of ADPCM samples. The first six channels operated at a fixed pitch with an 18.5 kHz sample rate, while the seventh allowed for higher quality samples and variable pitch playback. This allowed the system to play a variety of sampled sounds simultaneously, and early Neo ▶

» [Neo Geo] *Fatal Fury* was a breakthrough for SNK, which set it on the path towards its specialisation in fighting games.

» [Neo Geo] Popular series like *The King Of Fighters* sustained the Neo Geo well past its tenth anniversary.

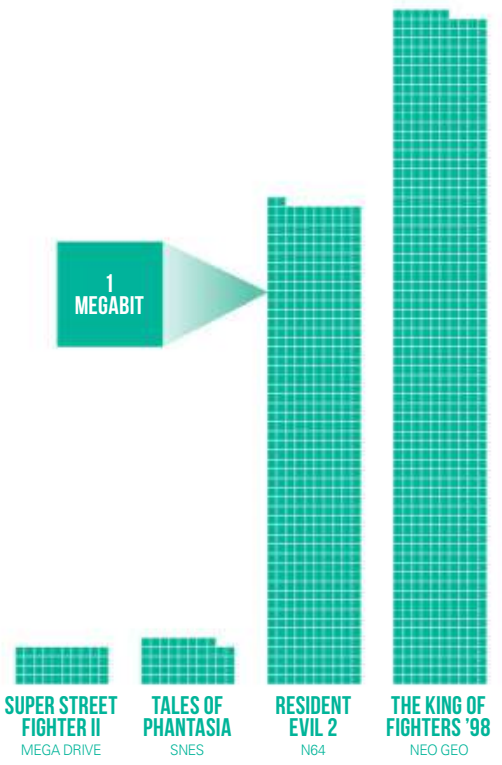
» [Neo Geo] Here's the system's scaling in action in *Samurai Shodown*, reducing Earthquake to a more typical character's size.

SIZE•MATTERS

YOU KNOW NEO GEO CARTRIDGES ARE BIG, BUT JUST *HOW* BIG? FIND OUT WITH OUR HELPFUL GRAPHS

LARGEST GAMES

■ The Mega Drive's largest officially licensed game was the 40 megabit *Super Street Fighter II* in 1994, while the SNES peaked in 1995 with the 48 megabit *Tales Of Phantasia*. By this point Neo Geo cartridges regularly exceeded 100 megabits, with the 305 megabit *Pulstar* being the largest by the end of 1995. With most consoles switching to CD-ROM, only the N64 carried cartridge development into the next generation. Its largest 512 megabit cartridges were first used for *Resident Evil 2* in 1999, by which point the largest Neo Geo cartridge was *The King Of Fighters '98* at 683 megabits. SNK's venerable system finally received its largest cartridge in 2003, with *The King Of Fighters 2003* reaching 716 megabits.



SAMURAI SHODOWN

■ On the Neo Geo, *Samurai Shodown* was a pretty huge game at 118 megabits, and there was no way that the home console versions published by Takara would match that. The SNES version came in at 32 megabits, a comparatively large size for the console, but featured tiny sprites and plenty of minor omissions such as the intro narration. Plenty of space will have been allocated to sound samples for both the music and voice effects. The Mega Drive version is even smaller at 24 megabits and loses both Earthquake and his background, as well as the intro graphics and some voice effects, such as the pre-fight announcement of character names. However, the sprites are closer in size to those of the Neo Geo version.

THE·REAL·DEAL

EVEN IN STILL IMAGES, IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY SOME PLAYERS SPLASHED OUT FOR A NEO GEO AES RATHER THAN SETTLING FOR HOME CONVERSIONS

ART OF FIGHTING

SNES

» Nintendo's console supports an awkward approximation of the trademark zooming camera, and features far smaller sprites.

NEO GEO

» The original version of *Art Of Fighting* features enormous sprites, as well as a camera zooming feature to allow for distance.

MEGA DRIVE

» Zooming wasn't included in the Sega version of *Art Of Fighting*, and the sprites are quite small, but there's no HUD border here.

FATAL FURY

SNES

» Some artistic liberties have been taken with the crowd here, as some of the spectators can't even be bothered to leave their seats.

NEO GEO

» Rich colours and a packed crowd make Sound Beach an exciting location for Terry's fight against Michael Max on the Neo Geo.

MEGA DRIVE

» The crowd here isn't as dense as in the Neo Geo original, and the palm trees on the right of the screen appear to have been cut down.

SAMURAI SHODOWN

SNES

» While some background detail here has been lost, the most noticeable compromise on the SNES is the miniscule player characters.

NEO GEO

» This background shows a great use of colour, with well defined and nice shading on the spectators, the sky and the ships.

MEGA DRIVE

» The crowd here suffers from the Mega Drive's limited colour palette, and the ship on the right has been noticeably simplified.

Geo games were often noted for the amount of speech they contained. Of course, incorporating speech into games was something that SNK had plenty of experience with. "In the past, we were known as 'that company that made a game sing'. Some can probably guess this had to do with our creation of the game *Psycho Soldier*. So, I wouldn't exactly say it was a main goal of ours, but rather something we naturally went along with," says Oda.

> "I'D HAVE TO SAY A HUGE ADVANTAGE OF BEING ABLE TO USE PCM SAMPLES WAS THAT WE COULD RECORD AND STORE A LOT OF CHARACTER VOICES"
> YASUYUKI•ODA

Composing sound for this chip involved quite a few steps. "First, we would get started by making the MIDI data. For this, we would generally use a MS-DOS MIDI sequencer program like ReComPoser. Next, we'd record our instruments via the PC program Sound Designer II to get our PCM data, and afterwards we'd integrate the tracks using a sampler made for the Neo Geo's YM2610 sound chip," Oda explains. "The end result had the track being sequenced into ADPCM, and so that's why we had to first record it to the PC so we could carry out the numerous necessary equalising and level checks to know exactly how it was going to sound."

The Neo Geo's YM2610 had two fewer FM channels than the Mega Drive's YM2612, but the ADPCM channels allowed for much greater use of voice clips and realistic instrument effects, which was a huge differentiating factor. It's certainly possible to tell when this capability went unused, as in the case of the rather poor *Legend Of Success Joe*, which could pass for a Mega Drive game on a musical level. When judged against the Sony-designed sound chip used in the SNES, the Neo Geo has two fewer channels for digital sample playback and can't use the SNES trick of pitch-shifting samples on most of them. This means that samples are commonly stored at a variety of pitches in Neo Geo games, taking up additional cartridge space. However, the extra FM and square wave channels give the Neo Geo a greater depth of sound, as well as the ability to save some cartridge space.

While the use of sampled sound was a great tool to have, it did have its limitations. "I'd have to say a huge advantage of being able to use PCM samples was that we could record and store a lot of character voices," says Oda. "When it came to music, however, we were able to achieve realistic-sounding tracks by playing the PCM guitar and drum samples together at the same time. However, it would take far too many samples if we were to make music solely using PCM. So, we devised a method of layering FM synthesised samples, which we could edit freely, on top of our PCM samples to achieve an even wider range of depth." Still, it was possible to use the PCM channels to create music that was unimaginable on other consoles – a great example is Data East's *Street Hoop*, which features realistic instrument sounds and even vocals in its background music.

Of course, one of the reasons that it was possible to do that was because Neo Geo cartridges were huge – and we're not just referring to the physical form factor of the dual-PCB beasts, which resembled VHS tapes in their size and shape. The system was designed for cartridges with a maximum capacity of 330 megabits, as advertised on the system's start-up screen, and from the beginning the ROM capacity of Neo Geo games dwarfed those of standard home console cartridge games. By 1992 the system had its first games over 100 megabits, which SNK marketed with 'The 100 Mega Shock!' branding. By 1995, *Real Bout Fatal Fury* had exceeded the 330 megabit limitation, and by the late Nineties SNK was promoting its high capacity 'Giga Power' games.

» [Neo Geo] *Street Hoop*'s music is memorable for using the Neo Geo's PCM capability to incorporate vocals.

» [Neo Geo] *Shock Troopers* often used just a single background layer, allowing for plenty of frantic action.

The MVS made a huge impact on the arcade scene due to its unique model of cartridge-based software distribution and multi-game boards. The idea of selling a motherboard separately from game media was not a new one, as Data East had first attempted it as early as 1980. Nor was the concept of a multi-game cabinet, as Nintendo had leveraged its NES hardware to produce the PlayChoice 10 system, and Sega had followed suit with the Mega Drive-

» [Neo Geo] In order to remedy the slowdown problems of *Metal Slug 2*, the upgraded version *Metal Slug X* featured a heavily revised engine.

» Neo Geo cartridges are very large, and unlike most game cartridges each contains two PCBs.

» [Neo Geo] *Last Resort* was an early shoot-'em-up for the system, and one which has stood the test of time.

» [Neo Geo] Late games like *SNK Vs Capcom: SVC Chaos* were distributed as all-in-one PCBs as well as cartridges.

» The Neo Geo AES was most popular in Japan, and Japanese games tend to be cheaper as a result.

based Mega-Tech. The Neo Geo's success comes from the fact that Alpha Denshi and SNK approached the concept from the other direction. Rather than taking popular low cost home hardware and throwing it into an arcade environment that offered much more technologically impressive games, the Neo Geo was built to impress in arcades and succeeded in doing so, as it was one of the best general purpose arcade boards available in 1990. Supported with popular games like *Baseball Stars*, *Fatal Fury* and *King Of The Monsters*, the system soon found wide acceptance. Over a million Neo Geo MVS systems made their way into arcades, which is an astonishing number.

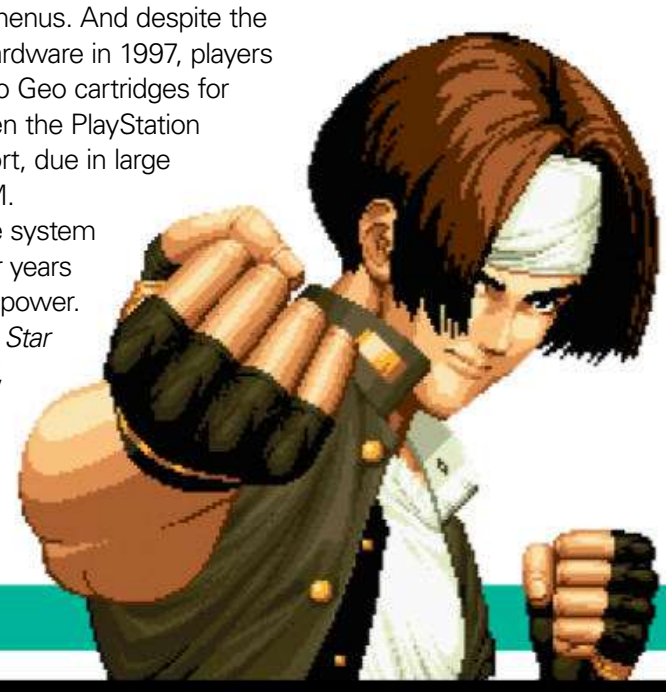
Of course, this meant that the home market was the secondary concern. That's not to say that the Neo Geo AES didn't make an impact, though – players were most definitely enticed by the prospect of playing arcade quality games at home. Within a year, player demand convinced SNK to rethink its rental-only policy and release the AES for sale in 1991. International distribution followed, and data from *Consoles+* magazine says that roughly 410,000 Neo Geo AES consoles were sold before they were discontinued in 1997, with most of them being sold in Japan. The company even attempted to bring the system to a more mainstream audience by creating the Neo Geo CD hardware, and sold 450,000 units in Japan as well as 120,000 elsewhere.

As the Nineties progressed, the power of the Neo Geo was naturally surpassed, both in the arcade and home console arenas. "This is something that actually caused us quite a lot of concern," says Kuroki. "You had hardware and consoles appearing on the market with far greater graphical prowess than the Neo Geo, and some of them even utilised 3D graphics." As its platform aged, SNK found itself having to adjust to new market expectations, especially as the 3D capable Hyper Neo Geo 64 failed to gain traction. "Though the Neo Geo specs did not change, the studio we used to develop the games sure did with the introduction of Photoshop as well as many of our developers using Softimage to create 3D models," Kuroki recalls. "We actually used Photoshop in the game *Garou: Mark Of The Wolves* to achieve this really great looking colour gradation effect while the helicopter in Kevin's stage and the bells in Hotaru's stage were made using 3D models which were then converted into sprites. We used whatever methods we could to push the limit and keep the fans happy."

> DURING THE HEYDAY OF THE NEO GEO, ITS BIGGEST SELLING POINT AND APPEAL WAS ITS ABILITY TO PLAY THE EXACT SAME GAMES IN THE ARCADE RIGHT IN THE COMFORT OF YOUR OWN HOME
>
> YASUYUKI•ODA

This also affected the production of AES-specific features. "During the heyday of the Neo Geo, its biggest selling point and appeal was its ability to play the exact same games in the arcade right in the comfort of your own home. However, once the PlayStation and other consoles hit the market, gamers now had access to systems with higher specs than the arcade and with more features, too. A simple port of the arcade game was simply just not going to cut it anymore," says Oda. The result was that where early AES games had been very bare-bones presentations of the arcade versions, from the mid-Nineties games began to include features like practice modes and more extensive option menus. And despite the discontinuation of the hardware in 1997, players continued to pick up Neo Geo cartridges for arcade perfection as even the PlayStation and Saturn often fell short, due in large part to their limited RAM.

One area in which the system began to struggle in later years was in terms of its CPU power. With games like *Twinkle Star Sprites* and *Metal Slug 2*, huge slowdown was experienced as the 68000 struggled to

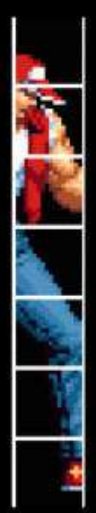


SPRITE•NIGHT

A LOOK AT THE UNIQUE WAY THAT SNK'S HARDWARE HANDLED SPRITES

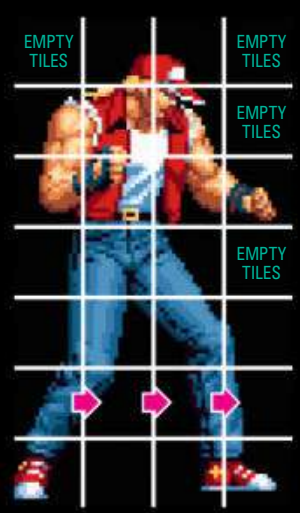
SPRITE

The basic element of a Neo Geo sprite is a tile, 16 pixels tall and 16 pixels wide. These can be flipped horizontally and vertically if needed. A Neo Geo sprite is a vertical strip of up to 32 tiles (512 pixels). Each one can use any of the 256 palettes of 16 colours.



LINKED SPRITE

By setting a 'sticky bit' it's possible to link multiple sprites together to create large objects, driven by the leftmost sprite. These inherit the height and vertical shrinking status of the original sprite, which can mean using empty tiles in places.



SPRITE OVER

The Neo Geo can draw 1536 pixels per scanline. Every pixel in a sprite is considered to be drawn to screen, no matter if it's behind another sprite, transparent or skipped due to scaling, so this leaves developers with a hard limit of 96 sprites per scanline.

keep up with all the action on-screen. Yet even this could be overcome by carefully optimising code, as proven by *Metal Slug X*. "With each new title came a better understanding of the hardware's limitations. This in turn shaped how we would develop the next game in line, and so it's safe to say that every game pushed the system to its limit," says Oda. Still, we're intrigued to know which titles he found impressive, outside of the fighting games he worked on. "For me, it's the Neo Geo's impressive line-up of shooting games," he replies. "Two that really stand out are the horizontal shooters *Last Resort* and *Pulstar*, both of which are praised as being masterpieces in the genre."

Even legendary machines like the Neo Geo eventually reach the end of their lives though, and the Neo Geo's fate seemed to be sealed when a disastrous buyout by pachinko manufacturer Aruze caused SNK to declare bankruptcy in 2001. However, the Neo Geo refused to fade away quietly. A successor company named Playmore, founded by SNK founder Eikichi Kawasaki, acquired SNK's intellectual properties and continued to develop and manufacture Neo Geo games for both the arcade and home systems. This continued until 2004, when SNK Playmore moved to the Dreamcast-based Sammy Atomiswave following the release of *Samurai Shodown V Special*. After 14 years, it was the right move – SNK Playmore got to leave behind the rampant bootlegging that had plagued the MVS during its final years, while its developers were free to explore the potential of more modern hardware.

Today, Neo Geo's place in gaming history is indisputable, with a legacy of fantastic games and a collecting scene full of passionate fans willing to pay top dollar for premium experiences. "It's wild looking back on 30 years of Neo Geo but I'd have to say one of the things that stands out the most is that during that period we were able to make many popular titles and characters that even today fans wish to see explored and expanded upon," says Oda. "The Neo Geo's unique history, which was built upon the success and fandom that shaped it, certainly makes it stand out among other popular consoles." He's right – there's something special about the Neo Geo, no matter how you experience it. Now, who's up for a game of *Windjammers*?

CD-ROM·ANTICS

HOW SNK'S ATTEMPT TO BROADEN THE NEO GEO AUDIENCE WAS HAMPERED BY TECHNICAL ISSUES

The huge storage capacity of CD-ROM was exciting to every game developer in the Nineties, and SNK had plenty of reason to be excited – the cost of manufacturing high capacity ROM cartridges ensured that the Neo Geo AES could never be priced to target the mainstream player. CD-ROMs could not only hold all of the data of even the biggest Neo Geo game, but had plenty of space left over for enhanced CD soundtracks. As a result, the company introduced the Neo Geo CD in 1994.

The limitations of the CD-ROM format did have some major impacts on the experience. The Neo Geo MVS and AES had very fast cartridge access, and because of that they had both needed very little RAM as graphical data could be fetched as needed. The seek times and slow loading of CD-ROMs made this impossible, so SNK equipped the Neo Geo CD with 7 MB of RAM – a huge amount for the time, exceeding the amount in the Saturn and PlayStation also launched that year. The company also equipped the system with a standard CD-ROM drive, rather than the double speed drives used in other CD-based consoles, most likely to save on costs. With plenty of RAM and a slow drive feeding data into it, loading times could be quite lengthy. The double speed Neo Geo CDZ was introduced in 1995 to remedy this issue, but was only sold in Japan.

As the sizes of games increased, they needed to load more frequently. This was often painfully apparent in later fighting games, which involved plenty of waiting between rounds as new character data was loaded. Additionally, some games suffered cutbacks such as reduced sprite sizes and animation cuts. But while it's not necessarily the greatest way to enjoy some of the more popular fighting games, the Neo Geo CD can actually provide a very good experience for older Neo Geo games, as many are small enough to fit entirely within the system's RAM and only need to load once upon boot as a result. Additionally, some Neo Geo CD conversions have exclusive features that are well worth exploring in their own right.

» Three models of Neo Geo CD exist, but only this top-loading model was available in North America and Europe.

AUTO ANIMATION

It's possible for the Neo Geo's video hardware to animate simple loops of four or eight frames like these cheering salarymen without CPU intervention. Every auto-animating sprite animates at the same speed, defined by the programmer.

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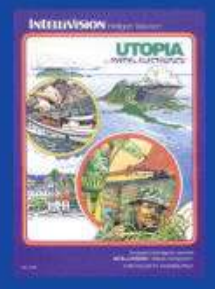
THE MAKING OF

UTOPIA

INSPIRED BY A SCHOOL CAFETERIA AND BRINGING REAL-TIME COMPETITIVE GAMEPLAY TO A CONSOLE FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME, UTOPIA IS WELL REMEMBERED FOR THE NOVELTY AND INNOVATION THAT IT BROUGHT WITH IT. WE SPEAK WITH CREATOR DON DAGLOW ABOUT HOW THE FIRST GRAPHICAL GOD GAME CAME INTO EXISTENCE…

WORDS BY ADAM BARNES



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** MATTEL ELECTRONICS
- **DEVELOPER:** DON DAGLOW
- **RELEASED:** 1981
- **PLATFORM:** INTELLIVISION, VARIOUS
- **GENRE:** REAL-TIME STRATEGY

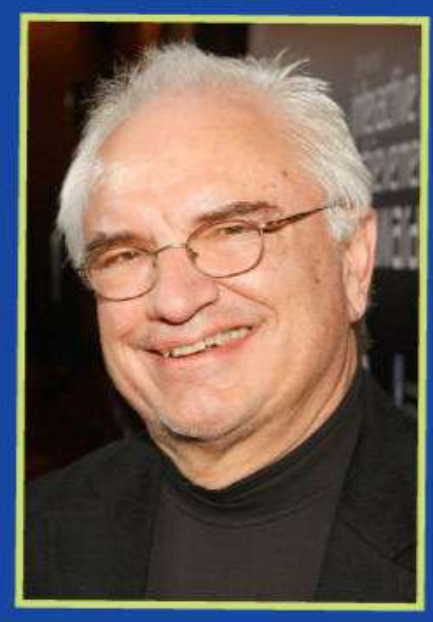
» [Intellivision] The start of any game of *Utopia* typically looks the same: two empty islands and two boats chasing fish.

Videogames are always about fulfilling some fantasy. Whether it's playing as a macho, demon-slaying space marine, saving the world as a trio of adventurers all with amnesia or simply being the fastest hedgehog this side of the Green Hill Zone. God games must offer the ultimate power fantasy then, handing the player omniscient control over a devout tribe, the world or even life itself. As a genre it's fairly open to interpretation in terms of how that power is given, but a lot of the mechanics and the design of such games haven't really changed much since their very first inception.

"I spent the last nine years before I went to work at Mattel as a hobbyist mainframe computer designer," explains Don Daglow, who many will know as a key figure of the early days of the games industry. "I was a school teacher, and I was trying to figure out how to use computer games in the classroom." Don was originally hired at Mattel to work on a big keyboard component that never got released, starting with an educational game called *Geography Challenge*. When that ultimately did not go ahead, however, he was moved over to the Intellivision. "They actually said, 'We've certainly got things that we'd like you to do, but what game would you want to do?'. And so I had a chance to think about what I wanted to do, and that was kind of where the whole path to *Utopia* began."

At the time Mattel had already built a reputation for high-quality games, and so for Don it was more important that his new idea "wasn't like everything else in the line" so as to create something that could separate itself from the rest of Mattel's products. "We were already dominant in sports games and as much as I love American baseball, we already had a baseball game, so they didn't need one of those. We were doing a lot of arcade-style games. So I thought, 'What would be different?'. Well, when you think about programs in the Seventies on mainframes, the first thing you think about are simulations because so many programs in the Seventies were one kind of simulation or another. And so I started to think about what kind of simulation I would want to do."

There were three key influences behind this simulation and with it the first true god game, says Don, each born entirely from his earlier life experiences and the enthusiasm he had for hobbyist game design on mainframe computers. "One inspiration came from when I was a school teacher, I think this would've been 1977, somewhere in that range, I taught in a poorer district, kids who were not getting to travel all over the world. These were kids who really grew up and stayed in one neighbourhood in one town, and I'm trying to teach world geography." Don tells a story of how he had noticed how the floor of the school cafeteria was made from linoleum tiles that meant it was essentially a large piece of graph paper. "If you show a game designer a piece of graph paper – whether it's paper or on the school cafeteria floor – we know what to do with that." Don went out and bought black electrical tape, waited until the cleaners had finished at the end of the day and had stacked the tables and benches to the sides of the room. With the tape he was able to create ▶



DON DAGLOW

The former teacher turned god game originator who created *Utopia*.

> IF YOU SHOW A GAME DESIGNER A PIECE OF GRAPH PAPER – WHETHER IT'S PAPER OR ON THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA FLOOR – WE KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THAT
>
> **DON DAGLOW**

BUILD YOUR OWN UTOPIA

THE TIPS YOU NEED FOR A BRIGHTER TOMORROW

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

■ Positioning of your structures is crucial. Schools should not be too far away from houses. Forts need to be placed in a way that they will provide strategic defence against pirates and rebels, while crops need to be placed in a way to provide effective rainfall.

MAKE HAY WHILE THE RAIN FALLS

■ If you're looking to place a new farm for food on your island, keep an eye on the movement of the rain cloud. While it is random and hard to properly predict, if you see an opportunity to place it in the immediate path of the rain then do so to claim an instant reward.

HAVE AT THEM

■ If all else fails, remember you can spend a bit of gold to cause rebels to appear on your opponent's island. It's a fairly nasty strategy but if used while they're preoccupied with following a school of fish, you can catch them with their guard down and cause some damage.

SPENDING SPREE

■ Unlike similar games that preceded *Utopia*, there's no real benefit to hoarding gold for a rainy day or to use strategically at a later date. So once you have the gold you need, purchase a new building as soon as you can before the turn ends for a quick and immediate score boost.

GO FISHIN'

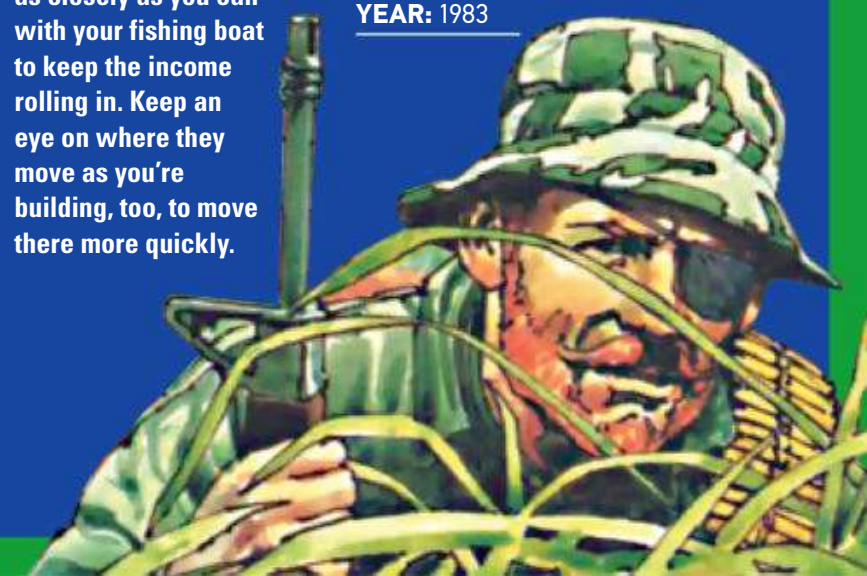
■ Once you've placed your structure at the start of your turn, get to fishing! Follow those schools of roving fish as closely as you can with your fishing boat to keep the income rolling in. Keep an eye on where they move as you're building, too, to move there more quickly.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

ASTROSMASH
SYSTEM: ATARI 2600, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1981

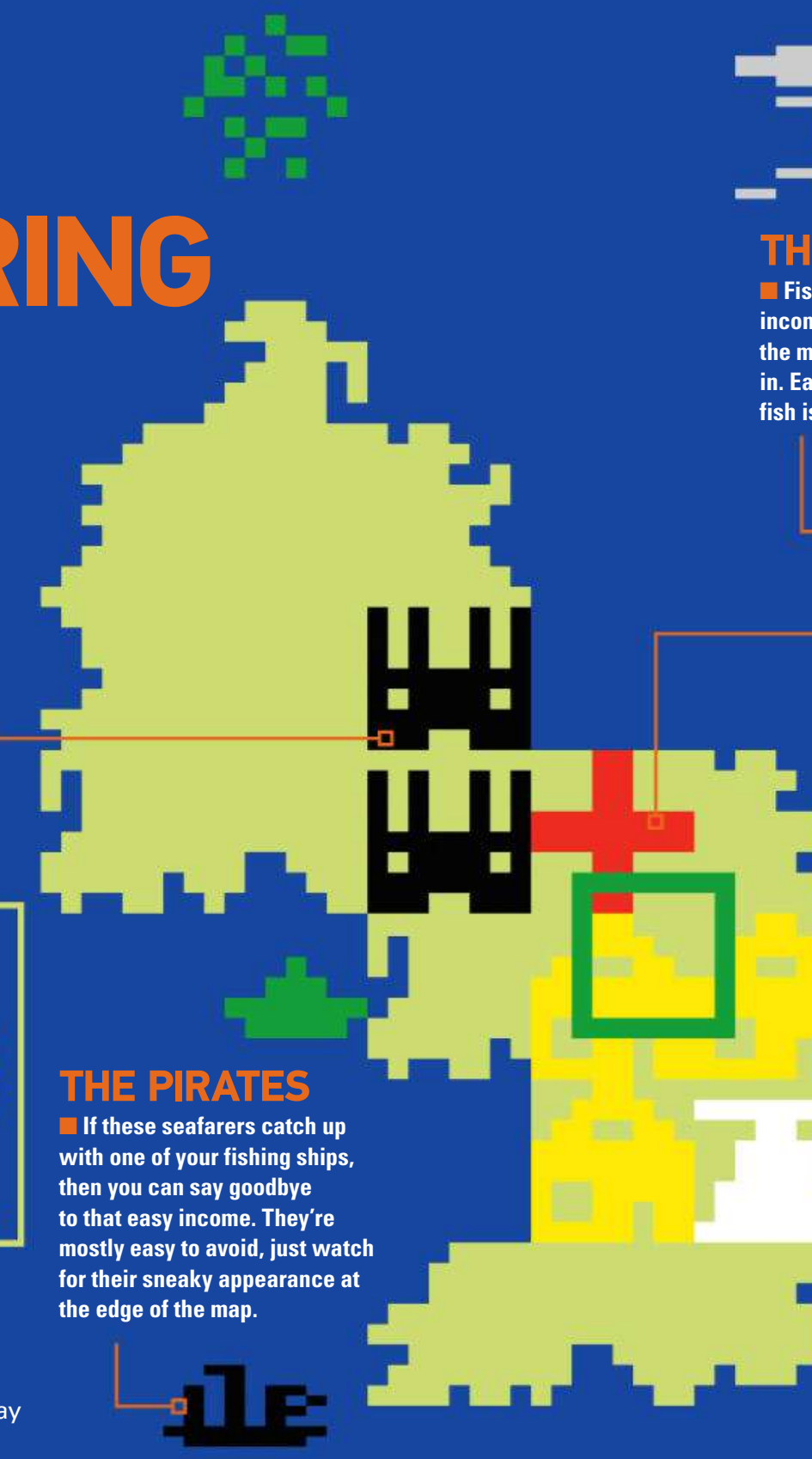
NIGHT STALKER (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: ATARI 2600, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1982

AIR RAIDERS
SYSTEM: ATARI 2600
YEAR: 1983



DISCOVERING UTOPIA

THE MOST IMPORTANT ICONS YOU NEED TO KNOW WHEN PLAYING



THE BLACK FACTORY

■ By themselves factories are not all that useful, but once the wellbeing of your citizens grows they bring bonus gold each turn. Build too many, though, and the pollution will decrease your population.

THE FISHING BOAT

■ Fishing will provide a slow but steady income of gold to your utopia, and it's where the majority of the real-time elements come in. Eagerly clinging to roaming schools of fish is a large part of the game.

THE RED CROSS

■ This represents the hospital, the most expensive purchase in the game but arguably the most valuable. It provides a huge boost to population happiness, making it essential for counteracting pollution.

THE PIRATES

■ If these seafarers catch up with one of your fishing ships, then you can say goodbye to that easy income. They're mostly easy to avoid, just watch for their sneaky appearance at the edge of the map.

» [Intellivision] Randomised rain clouds added an extra dimension to the real-time element, but took a lot of time to balance properly.

▶ a "primitive but fairly high-res map of the world", which had allowed him to create and design strategic games for his school kids to play with and learn about the world.

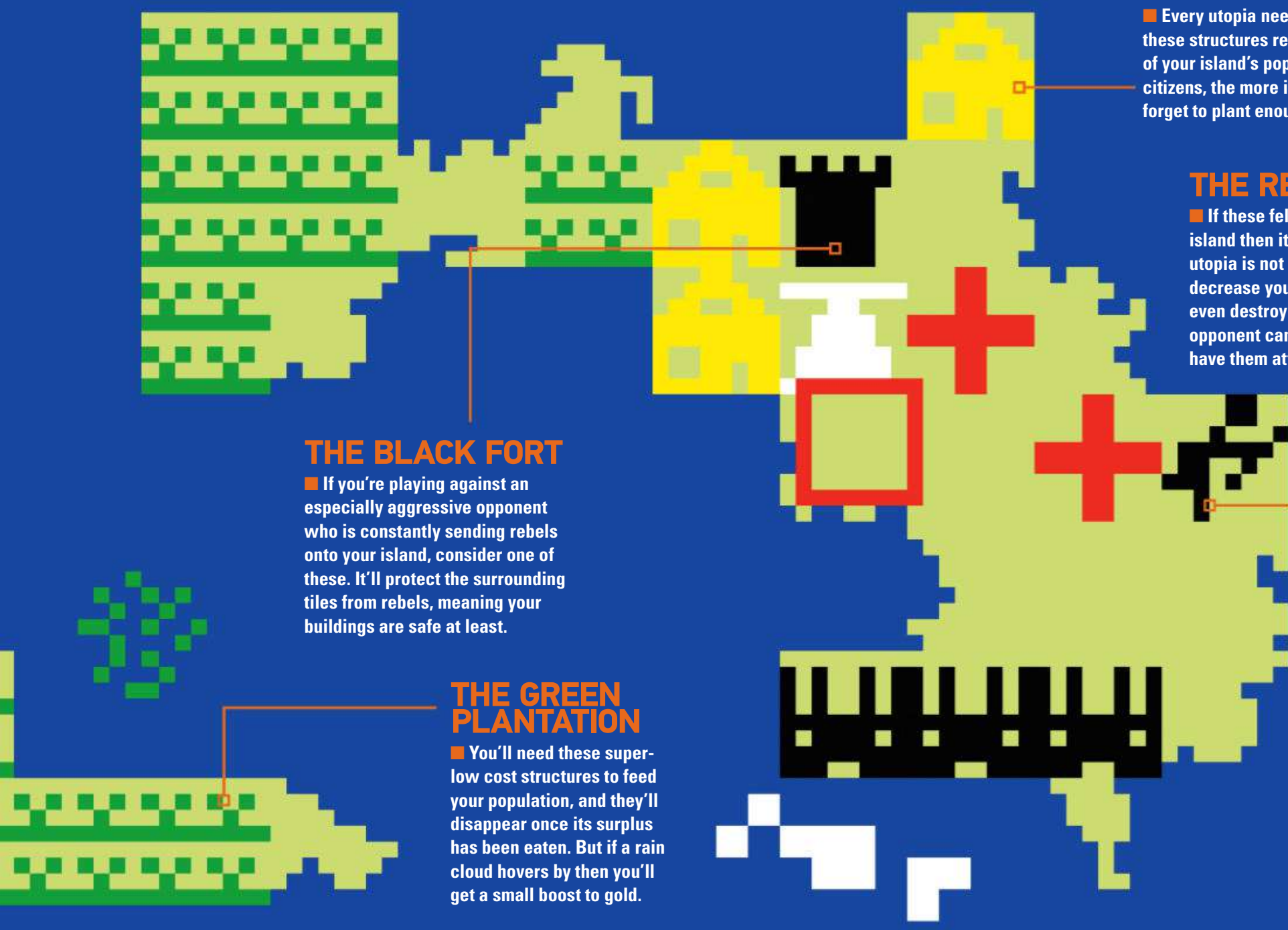
The second influence had come from the game *Santa Paravia En Fiumaccio*, a city management game for early computers that had players expanding their colony, maintaining the population and hopefully becoming the king or queen. "*Santa Paravia* on mainframe computers pre-existed *Utopia* but was more text-based rather than graphic," recalls Don. "I thought, well, if I take the Intellivision system's tiles and my school cafeteria tiles, I could combine the two." Though this inspiration was not the first game on mainframe computers to put players in control of their own fiefdom, as a hobbyist designer himself it was one that Don had spent time with and realised that it could be brought over to a visual platform, too.

The third influence was Don's own simulation, a game he had based on the 1960s film *Attack Of The Killer Shrews*. "It's a very bad movie," says Don, "the idea is that someone is doing nuclear tests and five or six people are on this island and there's a nuclear test nearby. The little shrews on the island are affected by radiation and grow into giant manbears, and so they're trapped in this one house in the middle of the island and they have to get out." While watching the movie at the time, Don recalls "thinking there has to be more to it than this", which ultimately prompted him to spend a weekend during his university studies creating a simulation for this very specific situation and to see how long it could take to escape the house. "The idea was that you had access to this data of how many other animals there were left for the shrews to eat and how many shrews there were. You had to decide what the optimal moment was for you to run to the dock and escape the island."

> "THEN WE STARTED PLAYING, AND OF COURSE THIS MEANT THE ISSUE OF ONCE YOU INPUT YOUR TURN, THEN YOU'RE JUST KIND OF WATCHING – AND THAT DOESN'T FEEL GOOD"
> **DON DAGLOW**

» [Intellivision] After each round, the scores are calculated and added to the total for the game, meaning an early lead can easily be matched.

So when Mattel asked what game Don would like to work on, it was this trio of obscure influences that converged to inspire *Utopia*. "The game is my old cafeteria floor tiles and simulation games that I did on paper with the kids, validated by the idea of *Santa Paravia* that I used to pitch the game and say that this was something that would work. And then the islands came from my *Attack Of The Killer Shrews* game, which was on a PDP-10


THE YELLOW HOUSE
Every utopia needs its people, and these structures represent a portion of your island's population. The more citizens, the more income – but don't forget to plant enough food for them.
THE REBEL
If these fellas appear on your island then it's a sign that your utopia is not so happy. They decrease your score and can even destroy buildings, and your opponent can also spend gold to have them attack your island.
THE BLACK FORT
If you're playing against an especially aggressive opponent who is constantly sending rebels onto your island, consider one of these. It'll protect the surrounding tiles from rebels, meaning your buildings are safe at least.
THE GREEN PLANTATION
You'll need these super-low cost structures to feed your population, and they'll disappear once its surplus has been eaten. But if a rain cloud hovers by then you'll get a small boost to gold.

mainframe somewhere in the relatively early Seventies. Those are the three elements that came together to create *Utopia*."

While this was the origin of the game, the next step was to come up with some ideas for what exactly would be the foundation for the gameplay. Ultimately this meant jotting down thoughts and ideas onto a piece of paper, the closest thing to a design doc that programmers had at the time. "The first thing that I did was the gameplay on the islands, and basically it's interesting because I believe the set of tiles in the final game and the set of tiles that I initially came up with are identical." The ideas came from the games he created for that map on the cafeteria floor, with extra logic added in. "I thought, 'If you're simulating a society, what are the things that would affect it?'. Well, we'd have to offset the hospitals for healthcare against factories polluting the air, you'd have to have food and the crops for the weather to go across the map. Those were all initial concepts that were built in, so much of the original vision for how the on-island gameplay would work was implemented and it was pretty much as planned." This was the simulation aspect of the game, which is familiar to anyone who has played a modern city-building god game: housing, schools, factories, hospitals and defensive forts could be added to each of the two islands. Carefully balancing these meant keeping the populace happy, or else risk a rebellion that reduced your overall score and could even lead to the destruction of your island's structures.

"Then we started playing," adds Don, "and of course this meant the issue of once you input your turn, then you're just kind of watching – and that doesn't feel good." And here's the thing, *Utopia* may well be considered the forefather of the god game – at least as we know it – but it can also claim to be the first example of a real-time strategy game, too, making it perhaps the only game in the industry's history that can say it was the first of *two* genres. "So that's when the RTS elements of the fishing boats and the PT boats and the pirates and the roving schools of

» [Intellivision] Hurricanes are more rare, but can be devastating. They'll sink fishing ships and destroy buildings caught in their path.

» [Intellivision] Rebels would disappear after a while if your island's inhabitants were happy, but this was much harder when overwhelmed.

THE STORY OF MATTEL'S ELITE SQUADRON OF DESIGNERS...

Before big business and consumer trade shows, before ray tracing and always-online gaming, the industry was a much more frivolous place. No one really had a sense that making games was a job, it was just a bunch of passionate developers making cool things. The Blue Sky Rangers perhaps best epitomise that.

Staffed by a number of Mattel's elite game designers – including Don Daglow – the Blue Sky Rangers were a secretive programming group within the company dedicated to conceiving new product ideas for the Intellivision. So called because of their 'blue-sky meetings' where they were given free rein to dream up their wildest videogame ideas, this was a team that was inspired to create greatness with a relaxed and fun attitude towards game design.

The secrecy of the group, so it's been said, meant their working location and identities of the very best designers at Mattel were kept a mystery to prevent rival Atari from stealing the crucial talent that these programmers represented. The first ever console war was serious business, of course, but only in the early videogames industry could this be dealt with in a manner of jokey espionage and subterfuge

The name itself was created by Howard Polskin, who had written an article about the secretive Mattel team in 1982 for *TV Guide* and wanted to give a less formal and ordinary name for The Application Software Programmers. In the article, even the programmers' names were swapped out for fictional equivalents, all to build that mystery and sense of fun about the team. Ultimately it stuck and even became a brand for Mattel, who would brandish its product boxes with an airforce-style badge with the slogan "In Hal we trust", a reference back to the leader of the group who had been named Hal in the article that had named them.

▶ fish and all that were added," says Don, "so it became a mixture of turn-based and real-time game." Algorithms were added into the game to simulate these randomly controlled real-time features, which required careful manipulation within each player's turn. A typical round meant building new structures, controlling fishing ships to follow the migrating schools of fish for extra income and spending resources to use a torpedo boat to counteract the threat of pirates. It was a fairly robust ecosystem, especially for the time, and added a more direct, competitive aspect to the two-player game that would've been completely missing otherwise.

"So often Atari's games were one-player," says Don, pinpointing the competition that arose between the two manufacturers in the first console war, "and so there was a lot of support from Mattel for games to be two-player. I felt like if I did this as a single-player intellectual exercise, which we did a lot of in the Seventies, then I knew the level of interest that it would get. Part of what was exciting to me on the Intellivision was that this was a two-player platform, it was set up for two players. So from day one of the game I felt very excited about doing a two-player game." The company had two-player gaming at its heart, to such a point that whenever the team of designers would take a break, they would play the Intellivision over any competitors that they had access to in the office. "We would play them in two-player against each other," recalls Don, "and that's what was exciting and fun. I had never even considered making it one-player."

> "WITH ANY INTELLIVISION CARTRIDGE, WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IS THAT YOU WOULDN'T GET VERY FAR IF YOU WERE BIGGER THAN 4K"
> **DON DAGLOW**

But making it two-player opened up extra challenges, since arguably more than in a single-player game it became essential to find the right balance. It couldn't have been a great game if one player always had an advantage over the other just for the sheer fact that they sat on a specific side when playing. "Obviously the two islands had to be the same number of squares," suggests Don as one of the key ways that the game needed to be balanced. "But getting the rain to fall equally on each island when it's a randomised effect and getting the hurricane to damage each island equally... oh, I spent, in the aggregate, days and days and days on nothing but that." Naturally there were no QA teams or playtesters to ensure the balance was just right, so for Don it was a case of carefully observing each new tweak to the algorithms himself. "I was just sitting there and watching the game and doing little hash marks of how many squares were being taken out by hurricanes and how many squares were getting rain. And so I would have to tweak the algorithms slightly, just over and over again. I didn't do that to the exclusion of all else, but probably the last four months of development I was spending significant time on that, literally every single week. And I spent probably a total of eight months of development on that project, and so the last half of it I was just constantly trying to tune-tweak the algorithms."

» [Intellivision] As the game approaches the final round, you'd find players would rather spend money on attacking rather than expanding.

» [Intellivision] *Utopia*'s scoring system rewarded players who emphasised careful and considered expansion, rather than rushing income.

Implementing such novel concepts into a two-player graphical simulation was not a simple process, as you might expect given the comparable technical restrictions of the time. "With any Intellivision cartridge, what would happen is that you wouldn't get very far if you were bigger than 4K," explains Don. "And if you're coding in a logical way, you would see that you have coded one third of the game and you're almost out of space, and so you go back and you compress, and you compress, and you compress." Don adds that programming at the time meant that the majority of the time was spent compressing the code so that it was tighter, cleaner and more efficient just to free up some space, ultimately leading to that "exciting moment" when a massive 500 bytes were freed up and the fun stuff could begin again. "Then you'd go back and create the game," he adds. "You'd just build it step by step in that way."

Don reveals that while he was teased by his colleagues for having the "world record for most code that didn't display anything on the screen", the truth was that there was a lot going on under the hood. The scoring system had to calculate not only the active parts of the game – such as the fishing ships – but also the various pluses and minuses that came from building an island utopia; pollution was a negative, for example, but the factory that generated it produced a positive output too. Food would only be grown if the rain happened by, and of course those rascally rebels could negatively affect your score, as well as your on-going performance. It was all tied into a sense of 'happiness', with Don asking what citizens might need for happiness and from there built a scoring system around it. "Later god games certainly took the visual language and the *idea* of *Utopia* and ran with it," says Don, "but the game wasn't just trying to have enough food to expand your kingdom. The games that preceded it had more narrow objectives, but actually the focus on the wellbeing of your people is where, for me, it is legitimately the first god game."

It's impossible to ignore *Utopia*'s legacy since it's easy to see the influences in the god games that followed, however what's interesting is how game-changing it must have felt at the time to an era of gaming that was just starting to find its feet. "It took several months to manufacture the cartridges after you finished and have the game shipped," recalls Don of the moment he realised he'd created a success. "So you'd be totally excited about your game, but around the time that you forgot about it and you were immersed in your next project, you'd come in one day with a shrink-wrapped box on your chair. But the clue I got that *Utopia* was a hit was when it was probably two or three months away from shipping, but it was shown at CES in January of 1982. So after the first day of the show, the next morning my wife called me and said, 'You'll never believe this, on the entertainment section of the *Los Angeles Times* on the front page is an article about *Utopia*, about it being this revolutionary game and one of the highlights of the CES show'. My jaw just dropped. What I did was just something that I loved, but people thought that it was special."

CLASSIC MOMENTS

Project Firestart

» **PLATFORM:** COMMODORE 64 » **RELEASED:** 1989 » **DEVELOPER:** DYNAMIX

After your first few moments guiding Jon Hawking around the Prometheus, you're not really sure that you like what you've let yourself in for. The first person you met on board was already dead, and had used his dying moments to scrawl a warning on the wall. The next lift took you straight to a corridor full of corpses. Someone – or *something* – has wiped out seemingly every human on the ship. It's not a matter of if you'll meet them, but when.

That still doesn't prepare you for the moment when it comes. Sound blasts out of nowhere as the green monstrosities appear on the screen, and they are *far* too close for comfort. You turn and run to put some distance between the creatures, only to find that you've hit a dead end and they're blocking all exits. It's time to stand, fight and pray. Round after round of laser fire is absorbed as they begin their attack, but finally the twin assailants crack apart and die. Relief washes over you, but you're already dreading the next encounter. ✱

BIO

Published by Electronic Arts exclusively for the Commodore 64, *Project Firestart* was a game like few others available in the late Eighties. Reviewers saw it as a very slick, unusually cinematic action-adventure game that clearly took a fair bit of inspiration from the hit film *Aliens*, albeit one which did involve a fair bit of fiddly disk swapping. Today, the game is recognised as an early example of the survival horror genre, featuring staple traits of the genre such as your character's limited combat effectiveness, heavy use of gore in cutscenes and general sense of isolation against hordes of enemies.

18+

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MORE CLASSIC PROJECT FIRESTART MOMENTS

Early Warning

The first appearance of the monsters wouldn't have the same impact if it hadn't been built up masterfully beforehand, and your encounter with this poor soul is the first real sign that something has gone quite horribly wrong. The regular view is enough, but this unexpected close-up rams the message home.

Chronicle Of Catastrophe

Reading ship logs and the diaries of the dead is a standard storytelling device these days, but it was a pretty innovative technique when *Project Firestart* utilised it in the late Eighties. Logging on to computers gives you the chance to learn more about how you ended up in this desperate fight for survival.

Grisly Gift

Pop down to the end of Corridor Y and make a turn, and you'll find yourself face to faceless with a couple of decapitated corpses, with all the grisly detail you could reasonably get away with. It's worth the trip though, as it's the only way to get the plasma laser – a stronger gun that will help shred baddies.

Not Over Yet

As you leave the Prometheus behind and watch it explode, you could be forgiven for patting yourself on the back. But that's a silly idea, as man is the real monster after all, and the evil Annar attempts to make off with all the data. If you want to see the good ending, you've got to defend yourself one last time.

THE EVOLUTION OF WIZBALL

During its first seven years, Sensible Software's focus was on making weird and wonderful shoot-'em-ups. Jon Hare explains how his firm's earlier shooters led to Wizball, and how Wizball influenced the Sensible shooters that followed

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

If you had to describe Sensible Software in one word then that word would be original. It's ironic, then, that Sensible founders Jon Hare and Chris Yates started out by working on Spectrum conversions for the Essex-based LT Software. Soon after, however, the pair landed an original project, which as Jon notes had a very simple brief. "*Twister* was commissioned by Mark Cale from System 3," Jon remembers. "He said he wanted the game to be like *Discs Of Tron*, but with a woman with big tits flying around in it – that was pretty much it! This was our first original game, so I was just experimenting with what I could draw with the package I had, using any ideas that came into my head."

The busty female protagonist and manic Buddhas of *Twister* were a far cry from *Discs Of Tron*. Another big difference was that unlike Bally Midway's game, each of *Twister*'s levels were unique. "We had been playing things like *Tempest* and *Space Harrier*," Jon explains. "And the machines that we were riffing from were all about seeing how far you could go and what the next level was going to look like – that was what drove you forward."

» Jon Hare is currently working on the multi-format action soccer game *Sociable Soccer 2020*.

In keeping with the Sensible developers' favoured genre, they made *Twister* far more of a shoot-'em-up than its Disney movie-based inspiration. They also set additional objectives of assembling letters, symbols and body parts to escape levels. "It was really just giving you another focus," Jon reasons, "because if you stripped away the secondary tasks then you would have just been killing enemies and advancing through levels. So collecting stuff gave you a purpose. There were many adventure games where you got parts of a key to open a door, and it was just adding a little bit of that in."

» [ZX Spectrum] Although *Discs Of Tron* influenced *Twister*, the Sensible shooter's foes differentiate it from the coin-op.

» [ZX Spectrum] Clearly *Twister* took some inspiration from Atari's *Tempest*, but its collection mechanics set it apart.

> "We had these little huts with scientists in, and we spread them across the levels [in Parallax] to give you a reason to explore"
>
> JON HARE

Twister's risqué promotion campaign focused on its voluptuous adversary, while reviewers praised the game for its quirky visuals and solid gameplay. Its authors then switched to the C64 for their follow-up, a top-down shooter with bas-relief visuals and black holes. "*Uridium* was definitely an influence," Jon acknowledges, "and also there were some arcade games we were looking at. We initially made the holes because we had constructed a level where you got stuck unless you could hyperspace. Then we thought about holes that when you went in you got spat out again. A lot of our development was like that. We had an idea to solve a problem and then it became a feature, and we would just feed on it."

Due to its multi-layered scrolling, Jon and Chris named their latest shoot-'em-up *Parallax*, and they tasked its hero with leaving his ship to look for supplies and info. "That was very similar to the collecting in *Twister*," Jon considers. "We had these little huts with scientists in, and we spread them across the levels to give you a reason to explore. The scientists' cards had a couple of functions – you got cash and bought things, or you got a password letter. That was really a sophisticated way of collecting pieces of a key and then going through exit doors, it was just a sci-fi interpretation. The shops helped to build *Parallax*'s universe. The other thing was that you could get cash from one hut and take it to another, so that gave you transportability."

Then prior to its release, *Parallax*'s scientist-based missions became far more immersive, thanks to a musician who was working for the game's publisher Ocean. "We went down to this basement where Martin Galway worked," Jon recalls. "He had made this music and he thought it was alright. I remember sitting in this room and watching this flickery screen of graphics that we had done set to his music, and it just blew me away. It made you feel like you were in a sci-fi film."

The grandeur of *Parallax* was applauded on its release, but Sensible's next shooter was a more trivial affair, designed to give its developers a rest between projects. "*Galax-I-Birds* was done in a week as a joke!" Jon grins. "It was just a rip-off of *Galaxians* or *Galaga* – or any of those games. It wasn't very special. We just made up birds for it – it was literally just that. A bird would come into my head, and I'd draw a swan, I'd draw a robin, I'd draw whatever. That's just how we worked in those days."

Chris continued this open minded approach shortly ▶

» [C64] As well as collecting paint drops, the Catellite can act as a bodyguard for the more fragile Wizball.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: MODES OF TRAVEL

FROM JETPACKS AND STARSHIPS TO BOUNCING ABOUT AND DONKEY RIDES

TWISTER

There are many ways to get around in *Twister* – in fact, there's practically a different method for each level. You begin by hopping from platform to platform, then you jump between a moving floor and ceiling, next you run down a vector graphic tunnel and then you fly around with a jetpack.

PARALLAX

At first glance, *Parallax* seems to be limited to flying a spaceship above a top-down star base, but there's a lot more to it. You can change your height and fly under the station, as well as moving east, west, north and south. You can also land and explore the buildings on the base by foot.

WIZBALL

If you play *Wizball* without reading the manual you'll spend the whole game bouncing about uncontrollably. This can be avoided by shooting an alien and bursting the bubble it leaves behind. This gets you a flight power-up, which you activate by quickly moving the joystick from left to right.

WIZKID

Unlike Wizball, Wizkid has a body, so he's able to run around as well as fly – well he can in his game's adventure stages, he's just a floating head in its arcade levels. In the course of his adventures he pilots an aircraft, gets blasted out of a huge cannon and rides a donkey off a cliff!

> "We started off [Wizball's] levels in black and white, and then we added colour, because that was the most visual way of showing progress"
>
> JON HARE

» [C64] Once you get flight power-ups in *Wizball*, the game's debt to William's *Defender* becomes clear.

» [C64] The power-up system in *Wizball* is based on similar mechanics in coin-ops like *Nemesis* and *Salamander*.

after *Galax-I-Birds* got a thumbs-up from *Zzap!64*, and he soon had a mechanic that would define the blaster's follow-up. "Chris had this circle that was bouncing on the floor," Jon remembers. "If you pushed sideways on the controller you added more spin, and you could pull back to reduce that spin. I added a face, and that showed more clearly that it was spinning. Then we tried to construct a game with bouncing around everywhere, which was really, really annoying. Chris was a big *Defender* fan, so we said, 'No. This isn't working. Let's make it fly like *Defender*.'"

Having taken notes from *Defender* for their latest project, *Wizball*, the Sensible developers then returned to the arcades for further inspiration. "At the time, Chris was really into *Nemesis* and *Salamander*," Jon points out, "and so *Wizball* became a game based around getting weapons and powering-up your ship. You'd get more stuff and then you would lose it and have to get it back again, which was directly taken from those types of coin-ops."

Although annoying, the pair decided that *Wizball* should be limited to bouncing when he lost his power-ups, which they thought was a fair penalty for taking damage. "It was frustrating as hell," Jon concedes, "but it marked the game out as different. It was a punishment for dying, but you got out of it quick enough that it didn't irritate you *too* much, then you got to enjoy the payoff of building Wizball up again. So I think it gave light and shade to the game, as opposed to it just being on a level."

But as nuanced as *Wizball* was becoming, Jon and Chris felt their evolving shooter

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: SECONDARY OBJECTIVES

MYSTIC SYMBOLS, MUGGING BOFFINS, COLOURING WORLDS AND MAKING MUSIC

TWISTER

It's fair to say that *Twister* isn't short of ancillary tasks. Besides topping-up your energy with pick-ups, you also have to avoid items that sap your energy or steal the last item you bagged. You also have to obtain multiple artefacts to level-up, ranging from mystic symbols to body parts.

PARALLAX

You have to be bad for the greater good in *Parallax*. One of your misdemeanours is drugging scientists in order to coerce them into helping you, and another is knocking them out. Once unconscious, you can steal their key-cards and use those to get password letters, and cash to buy supplies.

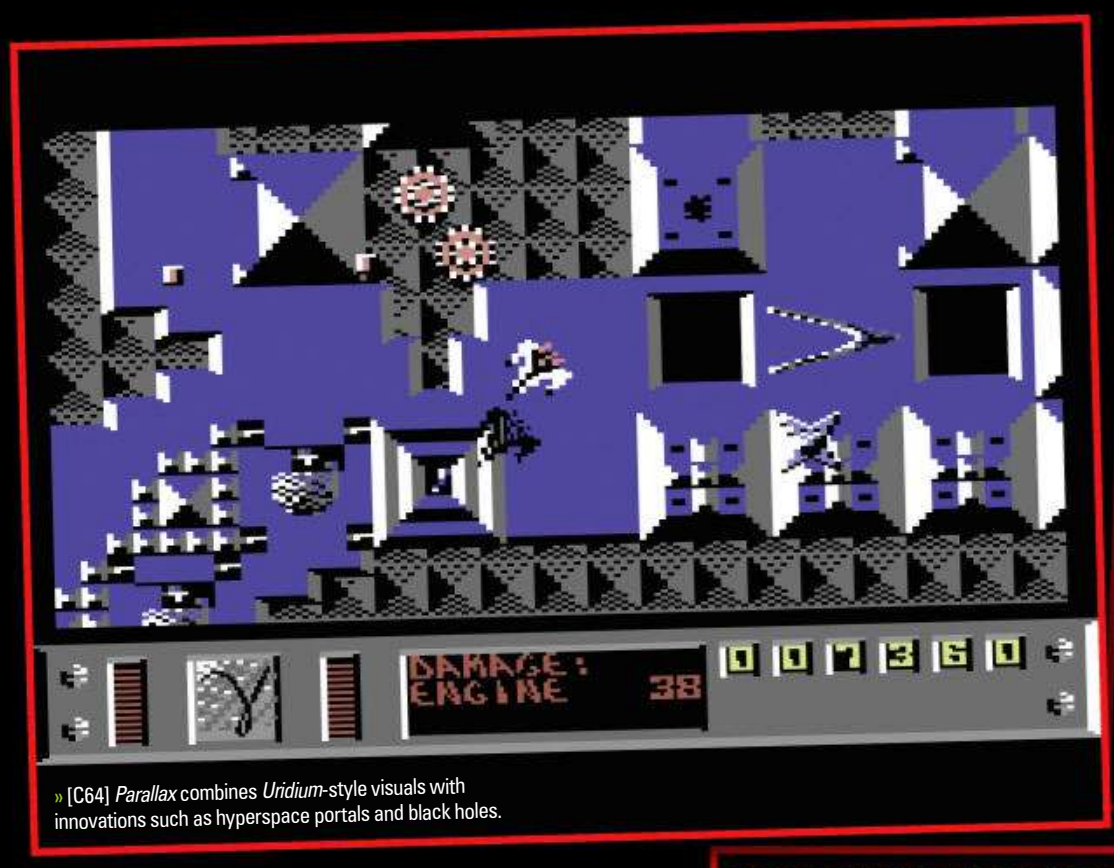
WIZBALL

For a shoot-'em-up, *Wizball* has quite a high-brow side quest. Simply put, you have to restore the colour to a black and white world. To do so you have to collect different coloured paint drops from various levels, and then mix their contents to create the hues required to colour each stage.

WIZKID

Although its puzzles are varied, *Wizkid*'s arcade stages consistently challenge you to biff foes with blocks. They set a second task, however, where defeated opponents leave bubbles containing paint drops, which when collected become notes. Once they form a tune, collectible coins rain down.

» [C64] *Wizball*'s police raids were intended as a joke, but when the cops arrive all-guns blazing it's not funny.



» [C64] *Parallax* combines *Uridium*-style visuals with innovations such as hyperspace portals and black holes.

» [C64] You get power-ups in *Insects In Space* by flying rescued babies into its *Stargate*-inspired dust clouds.

needed something else, and Jon had a fresh concept in mind. "I had an idea that came from when I studied theatre design at college," Jon recollects. "One of the components was lighting, where red, green and blue lights made different colours, so the RGB mix to make colours in *Wizball* came from my understanding of lighting and how it worked on stage. We started off the levels in black and white, and then we added colour, because that was the most visual way of showing progress."

Of course, while colouring stages was a great idea in theory, Jon and Chris needed a way for players to perform that task that complemented *Wizball*'s existing gameplay. "We thought about paint drops, but how were you going to collect them?" Jon ponders. "We needed a collector thing! And when Chris did its firing noise it went, 'Pew! Pew! Pew!'. It sounded exactly like a cat, so we called it a Catellite – instead of a satellite. Then a cat came out of it – because it was called a Catellite, and we made it look exactly like Chris' cat!"

The Sensible duo also armed the Catellite, giving their game two weaponised heroes

» [C64] There's no complex mission in *Galax-I-Birds*. You just have to blast space birds to bits!

» [C64] In addition to being a design package, *Shoot-'Em-Up Construction Kit* comes with shooters like *Slap N Tickle*.

– controlled by one or two players, but they stopped short of letting Wizball gather paint. "It was hard to keep the Wizball safe when you were also collecting with it," Jon reasons. "But by using the Catellite, you could hide the Wizball in a safe place and then send the Catellite out to collect the stuff without having your game reset back to zero and having the Wizball bouncing about if you made a mistake."

Although more robust than the Wizball, the Catellite could only take a few hits, and it had to be wary of collecting non-RGB paint drops

"The gameplay behind those paint drops was pretty standard," Jon reflects, "some things gave you bonuses and some things gave you penalties. And if you were too hasty and grabbed something without analysing what it was you didn't know what you were going to get. The extra life was a nice bonus, obviously, and the police raid was a joke. The Catellite going crazy was just stupid!"

» [C64] Appropriately enough, the budget Sensible shooter *Oh No!* borrows heavily from a coin-op called *Rip Off*.

The combination of leftfield power-downs, arcade power-ups, alien blasting and world-colouring made *Wizball* shine. Sensible had a hit on its hands, but instead of making a sequel it went in a completely different direction. "*Shoot-'Em-Up Construction Kit* was specifically just for me to use at the start," Jon reveals, "but none of the games I made with it were anywhere near the level of *Wizball* or *Parallax*, so we realised we couldn't sell them. But as a tool, it was really, really good. So we changed it into a *commercial* tool to sell to kids to make their own fun games. It was our first number one 'game', ironically!"

Feeling the need for a break after making back-to-back chart toppers, Jon and Chris next worked on a budget shooter, which was more than a nod to an arcade favourite. "*Oh No!* was very much influenced by an arcade machine called *Rip Off* – a two-player game where people ▶

» [C64] In *Parallax*'s exploration sections you mug scientists and use their key-cards to get passwords and supplies.

» [C64] *Insects In Space* has worlds at the top and bottom of each level, much like the second stage of *Twister*.

raided your stuff, and you had to fend them off," Jon admits. "We basically ripped off *Rip Off*, called it *Oh No!* and then made some stupid names for the things in it – like oxes! It was done very fast; I think it was a couple of weeks."

After pleasing Zzap reviewers with Oh No!, Sensible made *Microprose Soccer*, before devising a new take on *Defender* with unusual characters and dual worlds. "You've got to look at *Dropzone*," Jon says of the influences on *Insects In Space*. "The babies were the Dropzone colonists, and the angel was the hero. I don't think the top and bottom worlds came from *Twister*, I think they came from another arcade machine. We were big fans of Jeff Minter, so maybe it was from his stuff."

Insects In Space also had dust clouds that warped its hero to rescue the captured babies – much like the stargates in *Defender*'s sequel, and these additionally contained a wealth of handy power-ups. "The clouds were *very* likely to have been from *Stargate*," Jon confirms. "The power-ups were just some cool mechanics, and again something random that wasn't that far off the multi-coloured paint drops in *Wizball*. Psychologically, players would find it quite interesting, because in their minds they'd be thinking that it could be the best reward. Of course, it wasn't normally, but we were disguising that."

Like *Wizball*, *Insects In Space* was given a secondary player character to provide extra firepower – a cherub, but unlike the Catellite he wasn't controlled independently. "You didn't have anywhere to hide in *Insects In Space*, and it was very fast," Jon contemplates, "so controlling a second character would have been hard. The reason we needed the Catellite in *Wizball* was because the Wizball needed to hide, because it was delicate. The cherub was more like the extra thing in *R-Type*, rather than having any other function."

Insects In Space went down very well, but two years passed before Sensible worked on another shooter – *International 3D Tennis* and *Mega-Lo-Mania* kept the developer busy during that time. But even then, *Wizkid* had more blocks than blasting. "We were just having fun with *Wizkid*, because we could just throw anything we wanted in there," Jon beams. "It *did* have a *Wizball* shoot-'em-up bit, but we wanted to make it this freeform jazz game. You were effectively playing *Arkanoid* and clearing blocks, but it was in the *Wizball* universe. So you controlled Wizkid's head and juggled

> "We were just having fun with Wizkid. It *did* have a Wizball shoot-'em-up bit, but we wanted to make it this freeform jazz game"
>
> JON HARE

» [Amiga] *Wizkid* looks nothing like *Arkanoid*, but its block bouncing takes its lead from the popular coin-op.

blocks on it, and caught them in his teeth and threw them around."

Not content with giving their Wizball sequel arcade-inspired stages, Jon and Chris created adventure-influenced sections for it, and added a second shooter. "The bits where you were exploring with Wizkid's body and running around solving crazy problems were basically like any adventure game," Jon says. "You picked up objects, worked out what to do with them and moved on like that. You also had a crossword that popped up, and you even had a game of *Asteroids* at the end! So it wasn't any one type of game; it was lots mashed together."

As if to make *Wizkid* even more eclectic, Sensible gave depth to its block clearing by incorporating paint drops as a tribute to *Wizkid*'s predecessor – *Wizball*. "We kept the bubbles with the power-ups, but you also got paint drops in the bubbles, and that was directly from *Wizball*," Jon notes. "But rather than colouring the land they went into musical notes that were red, green, yellow and blue. When you had a complete tune the notes turned into money and fell from the sky, which you caught. Then you bought things from a shop, which went back to *Parallax*."

More nods to Sensible shooters followed, including a task of amassing items to unlock *Wizkid*'s last level, which harked back to *Twister* and *Parallax*. "Collecting kittens was another collecting task like in our earlier games," Jon verifies. "You had multiple exits from each level, so you could miss some and still get to the end, but then you couldn't complete the game

» [Amiga] Two of *Wizkid*'s eclectic mini-games are shooters – there's a *Wizball* homage and an *Asteroids* tribute.

because on every level you needed to collect a kitten. At the end of the game, you needed enough kittens to beat this evil mouse in a boat race and get into the castle first. Otherwise he slammed the door to keep you out!"

Despite *Wizkid* reviewing far better than it sold, Jon still loves the off-the-wall project. Its *Wizball* and *Asteroids* tributes are the last of a long line of Sensible shooters, which he looks back at with fondness, and he even offers hope of continuing their lineage. "That shoot-'em-up theme that started with *Twister* and ended with some of the sections in *Wizkid* ran through our company throughout a seven-year span," Jon enthuses. "So doing a new *Wizball* game would be fun, but *Wizkid* established that a follow-up isn't necessarily going to be like *Wizball*. Maybe a point-and-click adventure would be good, but I don't know if a shoot-'em-up would be deep enough now. Having said that, maybe something on mobile might work."

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: UPGRADE PATHS

HOW AMMO PICK-UPS AND BUYING SUPPLIES LED TO WEAPON UPGRADES

TWISTER

The combat in *Twister* differentiates it from less thoughtful shooters. You fight the twister itself with your bare hands, but until then you have to keep reloading your gun or you're totally defenceless. Worse still, there are power-downs that steal your ammo away as soon as you collect it.

PARALLAX

You start *Parallax* with basic supplies, but then you need to steal key-cards to get cash to buy more. As well as fuel and ammunition for your spaceship, and ammo for the gun you take with you on on-foot missions, the Bonanza Packs that are sold also top-up the oxygen that you're breathing.

WIZBALL

Wizball is all about upgrades. Besides the flight power-up, various other pick-ups are left by fallen enemies. A second player character – the Catellite – gives you more firepower and collects paint, but there are also shields, multi-directional shots and smart bombs to add to your arsenal.

INSECTS IN SPACE

The power-ups in *Insects In Space* revolve around the game's dust clouds, which appear when you hold down fire – tapping fire blasts lasers out of the heroine's eyes! Entering a dust cloud with rescued babies gets you bonuses ranging from bombs and shields to level-ups and a cherub sidekick.

Fantasy Zone Gear

WHEN FANTASY HARDWARE JUST DOESN'T HAVE ENOUGH FANTASY

» Game Gear » 1991 » Sanritsu

As much as I love my Game Gear Micro collection, I am a typical gamer and I can't help but look forward to the next thing on the horizon. For me, that has been a hypothetical Game Gear Mini tailored to the international market – similar in size to the original Game Boy Advance, powered by a rechargeable battery and hosting a more substantial list of games. When I put my list of games together for my dream device, *Fantasy Zone Gear* was one of the very first choices I made.

One of the reasons that the Game Gear doesn't get as much love as other Sega hardware is that it doesn't have many classics to call its own. I won't dispute that, but what I do find interesting is that it hosts some totally unique takes on fan favourites, which often don't receive much in the way of recognition. Internationally, *Fantasy Zone Gear* is simply known as *Fantasy Zone* on its packaging, which does a lot to obscure the fact that it's actually a completely bespoke version of the game, retaining the same basic game design while changing up the background graphics, boss fights and even the shop system. If you've ever wanted to be able to swap out your weapons at will, this is the *Fantasy Zone* that allows that to happen. For those of you that have doubted the richness of the Game Gear's colour palette, this will soon set you straight.

I feel like putting *Fantasy Zone Gear* on modern hardware would definitely have benefits all round. For the game itself, the use of a modern LCD screen would eliminate the ghosting seen on the original hardware, as well as bringing out those beautiful colours. It'd be lovely to see the game catch on with people who only picked up my hypothetical Game Gear Mini for the *Sonic* games, too. Until we get to that point – and it may simply never happen, since Sega doesn't appear to have planned any such hardware – I'll continue to champion this cool, weird and unjustly overlooked rendition of an arcade classic.

THE HISTORY OF SEYMOUR

WORDS BY
DAVID CROOKES

When a Dizzy game ended up being canned for being too real a new character began to form. Peter Ranson discusses the birth of 'movie star' Seymour whose role in two Dizzy-style adventures and a host of spin-offs made Retro Gamer want to see more

» [C64] *Super Seymour Saves The Planet* took its cue from *Bomb Jack* with several types of enemy able to be killed in different ways.

» [Amstrad CPC] *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* had a staggering 96 screens and included eight different film sets.

> "The proposal was to put Dizzy into a Hollywood setting with the idea of having castles and all the rest so I went away and designed it"
>
> PETER RANSON

Some people, it seems, had little time for Seymour, the potato-like character who starred in graphic adventures and spin-off arcade games in the early Nineties. "I remember some reviewer on an Amiga magazine calling the character the spawn of Satan but it made me smile," says Peter Ranson, the brains behind the odd-looking fellow. "I recall thinking, yeah, OK, you don't like the game but at least I've made an impact somewhere." Yet even today, Seymour cuts opinion.

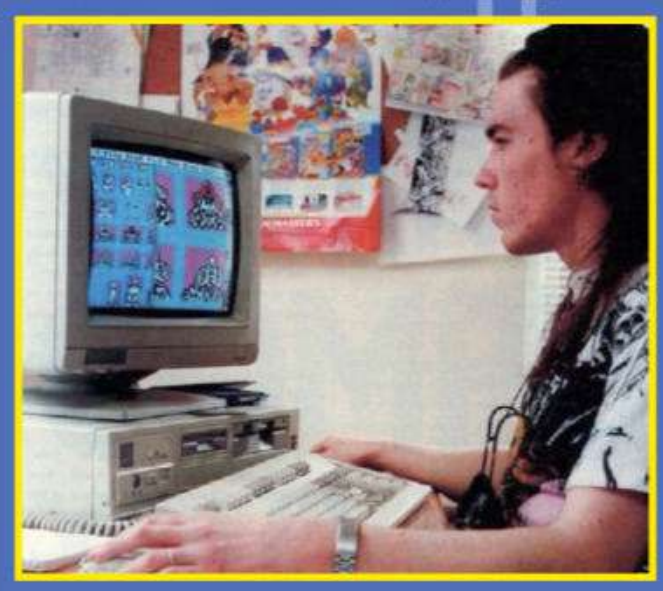
Prior to talking to **Retro Gamer**, Peter spent time reacquainting himself with *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* by watching a walkthrough video on YouTube. It was the character's first game, initially released in 1991 by Codemasters and developed by Big Red Software.

"Reading all these comments, it's funny to see people are saying Seymour's just a fat Dizzy; that it's *Dizzy* with a different character," Peter laughs. "Well, yeah, fucking hell it is! And there's definitely a reason for that."

Before developing *Seymour Goes To Hollywood*, Big Red had taken over the ever-popular *Dizzy* franchise from Philip and Andrew Oliver. Neal Vincent was tasked with fleshing out the twins' rough design and the resulting title, *Magicland Dizzy*, was widely acclaimed – so much so that this fourth adventure was dubbed "the most accomplished game in the series so far" by *Amiga Power* reviewer Stuart Campbell.

As such there was no doubt over who should continue to handle the next set of adventures featuring everyone's favourite eggs-cellent explorer and Big Red was commissioned to create *Dizzy V* – a title that was to be called *Dizzy In Movie Land*.

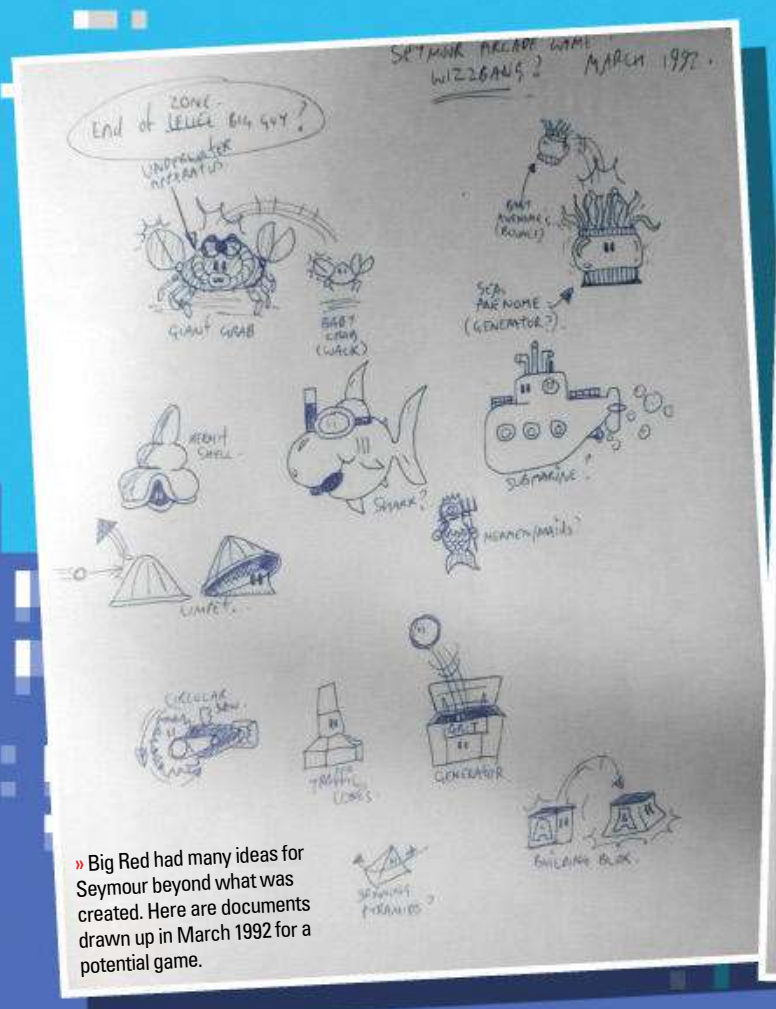
"The proposal was to put Dizzy into a Hollywood setting with the idea of having castles and all the rest so I went away and designed it," says Peter. What emerged was a story in which Dizzy would leave the Yolk Folk and step into the real world but the bods at Codemasters weren't entirely sure this was the right approach for their money-spinning character.



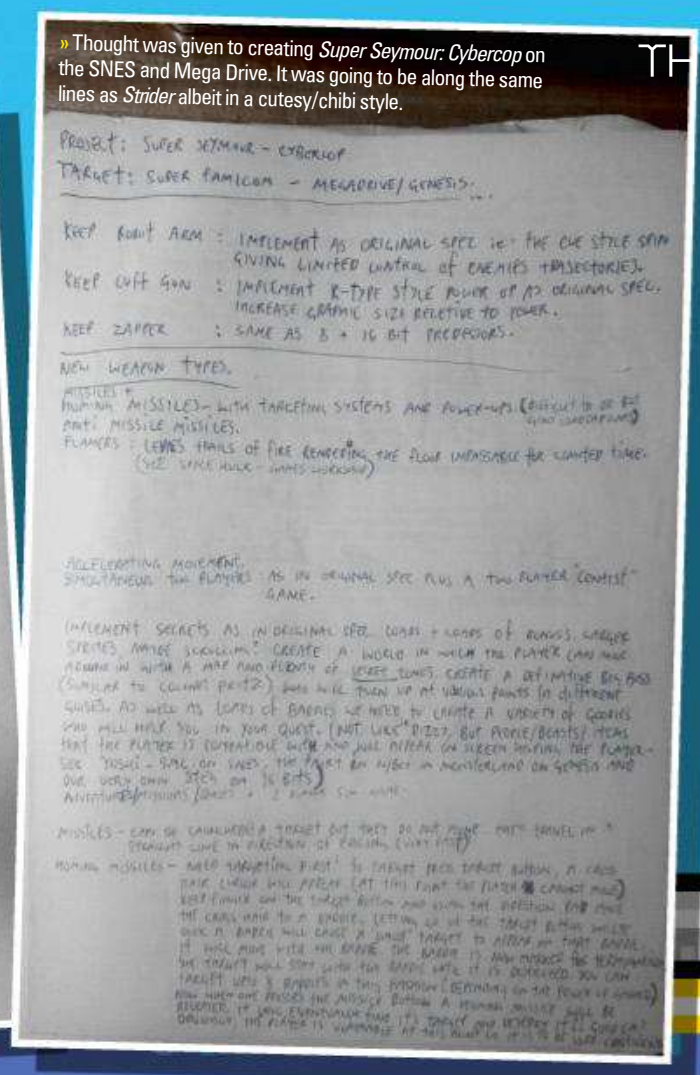
» Pete Ranson creating sprites for *Wild West Seymour*. "By today's standards, development was chaotic," he tells us.

"The game was all on paper at this point. No screens had been laid out and it was just a general loose kind of design with a majority of puzzles laid out as conceptual ideas," Peter says. "But then Philip and Andrew pulled the plug. They did it in a lovely way but the reasoning behind it was that they didn't really want to put Dizzy into this real world environment."

Rather than scrap the work put into *Dizzy In Movie Land*, Codemasters agreed that Big Red could introduce a fresh protagonist. "The Olivers were aware of the effort we had put into the design documents and they were happy for us to use their game engine," Peter explains, dismissing suggestions made in *Amstrad Action* that the game had actually got to the coding stage. "At the end of the day we may have been part of a separate company but Big Red had strong links to Codemasters and we'd all help each other out."



» Big Red had many ideas for Seymour beyond what was created. Here are documents drawn up in March 1992 for a potential game.


PROJECT: SUPER SEYMOUR - CYBERCOP
TARGET: SUPER FAMICOM - MEGADRIVE/GENESIS.
KEEP ROBOT ARM : IMPLEMENT AS ORIGINAL SPEC ie: THE CHE STYLE SPIN GIVING LIMITED CONTROL OF ENEMIES TRAJECTORIES.
KEEP CUFF GUN : IMPLEMENT R-TYPE STYLE POWER UP AS ORIGINAL SPEC. INCREASE GRAPHIC SIZE RELATIVE TO POWER.
KEEP ZAPPER : SAME AS 8 + 16 BIT PREDECESSORS.
NEW WEAPON TYPES.
HOMING MISSILES - WITH TARGETING SYSTEMS AND POWER-UPS
ANTI MISSILE MISSILES.
FLAMERS : LEAVES TRAILS OF FIRE REMAINING THE FLOOR UNPASSABLE FOR LIMITED TIME.
ACCELERATING MOVEMENT.
SIMULTANEOUS TWO PLAYERS AS IN ORIGINAL SPEC PLUS A TWO PLAYER "CONTEST" GAME.
IMPLEMENT SECRETS AS IN ORIGINAL SPEC. LOADS + LOADS OF BONUSES, WEAPON STRETCH, MULTI SCROLLING. CREATE A WORLD IN WHICH THE PLAYER CAN MOVE AROUND WITH A MAP AND PLENTY OF SECRET ZONES. CREATE A DEFINITIVE BIG BOSS (SIMILAR TO COLONEL PART 2) WHO WILL TURN UP AT VARIOUS POINTS IN DIFFERENT GUISES. AS WELL AS LOADS OF BADDIES WE NEED TO CREATE A VARIETY OF GOODIES AND HELP YOU IN YOUR QUEST. (NOT LIKE "PIZZA" BUT MORE/BEASTS/ITEMS THAT THE PLAYER IS COMPATIBLE WITH AND JUST ATTACK ON SCREEN MINIMAL THE PLAYER - SEE "SUPER-R-TYPE" ON SNES. THE PLAYER CAN FIGHT IN MONSTERLAND ON GENESIS AND OUR OWN SPECIAL ON 16 BITS)
MISSILES - CAN BE LAUNCHED AT A TARGET BUT THEY DO NOT HOME ONTO TARGET (STRAIGHT LINE IN DIRECTION OF FACING WHEN FIRED)
HOMING MISSILES - HOME TARGETING FIRST TO TARGET NEAR TARGET BUTTON, IN CASE THE CHOSEN WILL FOLLOW EACH OTHER THE PLAYER CAN FIRE ONE TARGET BUTTON AND THEN THE DIRECTION FOR THE OTHER AND THE TARGET BUTTON AND THEN THE DIRECTION FOR THE OTHER. THE CHOSEN WILL CHASE A SMART TARGET TO ATTACK AT THAT BADDIE. IT WILL HOME INTO AN ENEMY. THE BADDIE IS NOW MARKED AS SOMEBODY'S TARGET SO THE OTHER MISSILE WILL CHASE THE NEXT BADDIE. IF YOU DESTROY THE BADDIE THAT YOU ARE TARGETTED WITH THE

CONVERSION CAPERS

GOSH! SEYMOUR WAS A CROSS-PLATFORM STAR

ZX SPECTRUM

Seymour Goes To Hollywood was originally developed for the ZX Spectrum by Fred Williams and Peter Ranson and each of the 96 screens pop with colour thanks to good use of the Speccy's palette. Although there is attribute clash, Seymour looks cute and the jolly tune isn't too grating.

AMSTRAD CPC

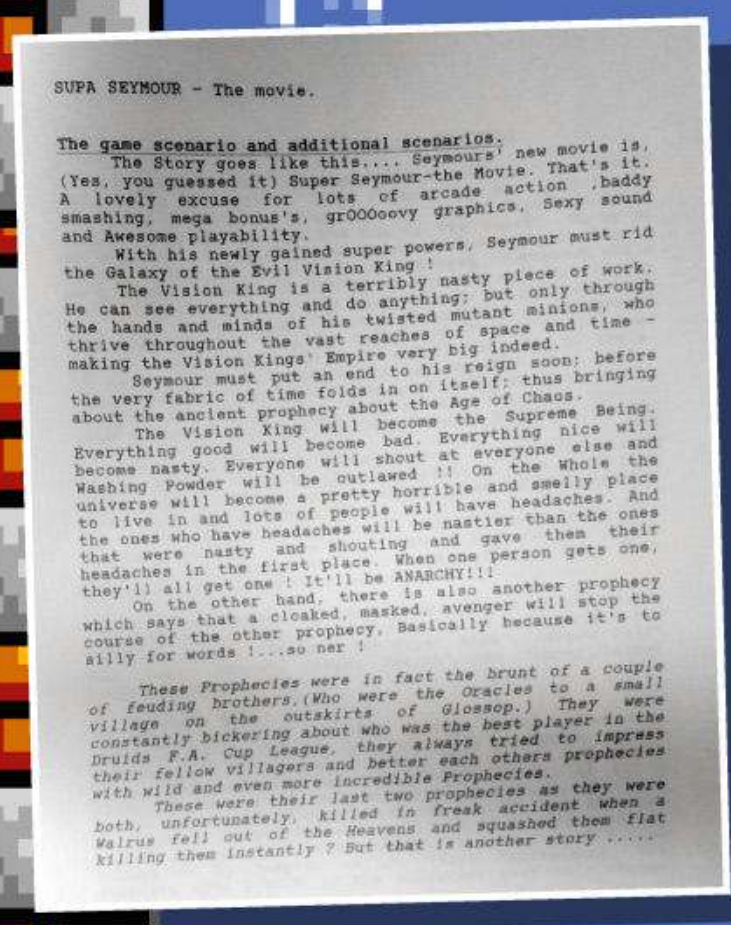
To its credit, Big Red didn't do straight Spectrum ports for the Amstrad CPC although the graphics in this version were brought over from the Speccy before being shaded and coloured. It used Mode 1 so it was limited to four colours but it looked great and ran very smoothly.

COMMODORE 64

This version was disappointing. Not only was it a Spectrum port, it ran far more slowly than on the Speccy and the Amstrad CPC which made for a frustrating experience. It also failed to make use of the computer's graphic capabilities: Seymour was entirely white and the game looked rather washed out.

AMIGA

Developed by Optimus Software which had worked on other Codemasters' titles, *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* was taken to another level thanks to its bright cartoon graphics and fluid gameplay. Lovely animations such as Seymour pumping up a balloon can't fail to make you smile and the music bounces along well.


SUPA SEYMOUR - The movie.

The game scenario and additional scenarios.

The Story goes like this.... Seymours' new movie is, (Yes, you guessed it) Super Seymour-the Movie. That's it. A lovely excuse for lots of arcade action ,baddy smashing, mega bonus's, grOOOoovy graphics, Sexy sound and Awesome playability.

With his newly gained super powers, Seymour must rid the Galaxy of the Evil Vision King !

The Vision King is a terribly nasty piece of work. He can see everything and do anything; but only through the hands and minds of his twisted mutant minions, who thrive throughout the vast reaches of space and time - making the Vision Kings' Empire very big indeed.

Seymour must put an end to his reign soon; before the very fabric of time folds in on itself; thus bringing about the ancient prophecy about the Age of Chaos.

The Vision King will become the Supreme Being. Everything good will become bad. Everything nice will become nasty. Everyone will shout at everyone else and Washing Powder will be outlawed !! On the Whole the universe will become a pretty horrible and smelly place to live in and lots of people will have headaches. And the ones who have headaches will be nastier than the ones that were nasty and shouting and gave them their headaches in the first place. When one person gets one, they'll all get one ! It'll be ANARCHY!!!

On the other hand, there is also another prophecy which says that a cloaked, masked, avenger will stop the course of the other prophecy. Basically because it's to ailly for words !...so ner !

These Prophecies were in fact the brunt of a couple of feuding brothers.(Who were the Oracles to a small village on the outskirts of Glossop.) They were constantly bickering about who was the best player in the Druids F.A. Cup League, they always tried to impress their fellow villagers and better each others prophecies with wild and even more incredible Prophecies.

These were their last two prophecies as they were both, unfortunately, killed in freak accident when a Walrus fell out of the Heavens and squashed them flat killing them instantly ? But that is another story .....

» In 1991, Big Red kicked around ideas for *Supa Seymour: The Movie* which would have had "lots of arcade action", "baddy smashing" and "grOOOoovy graphics".

» [Amiga] Put on a pair of sunglasses in the 16-bit versions of *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* and the screen itself would darken.

mainly set in the Golden Age of Hollywood and we certainly weren't worried about any movie company coming to sue us. Sure, we'd heard the stories about Disney taking legal action over cakes based on their characters and selling them on the high street but did they really do that? We were kids messing around and didn't really think about it."

Indeed, more thought was given to the game itself, with Peter and Fred taking what they'd learned on *Magicland Dizzy* and applying it to *Seymour Goes To Hollywood*. "At the end of the day, all the puzzles are effectively keys and doors," Peter explains. "You get an object, you take the object to another object, and you select it while standing on the object and it either triggers an event which turns the object into something else or you have a bit of dialogue which reveals a new object – the concept of door-key, door-key, door-key."

Peter loved creating the puzzles and he'd always start at the end and work his way to the beginning. "You'd decide where you needed to get to and then figure out how to get there by working the puzzles backwards," he says. "For example, at the beginning of *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* the initial puzzle is about getting past the security guard who doesn't recognise Seymour as a star. We started there and thought 'Seymour will have to wear sunglasses because all movie stars wear sunglasses' and that's the joke and the process of creating the puzzle."

» [Amstrad CPC] Although Seymour had an energy bar, you still needed to have your wits about you as you sought to collect the required objects.

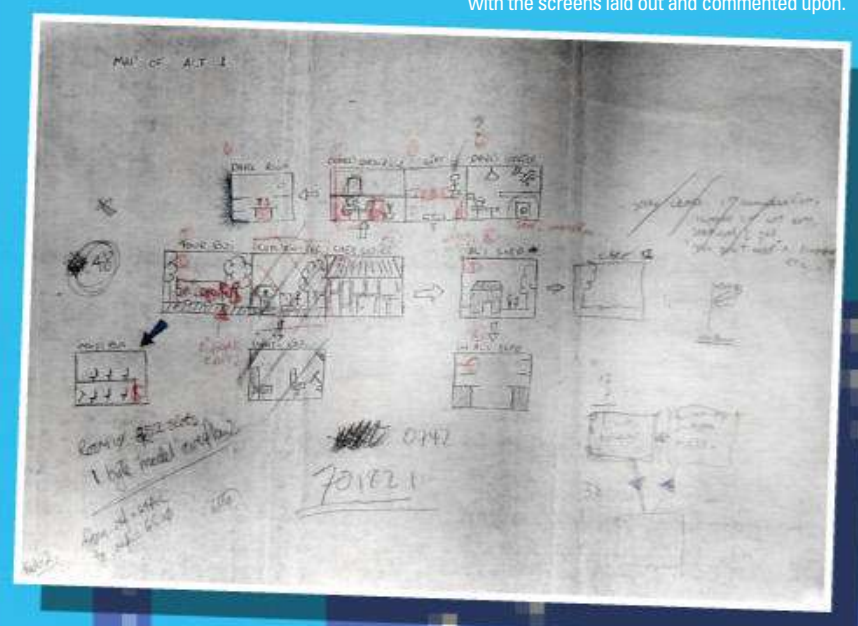
Still, Big Red wanted to introduce elements into *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* that would help distinguish it from the *Dizzy* franchise and one way was to ensure it didn't look identical. "I remember changing all the graphics to ensure the artwork wasn't the same," Peter says. "But there were natural constraint. We were using the same engine as *Dizzy* so fundamentally it was going to end up looking similar. From a distance of 30 years, it does look like a *Dizzy* game with a different character. But that's what it was."

Even so, Big Red tried to break away at times from the 'door-key' concept, providing fresh twists such as a mind-troubling puzzle involving a parrot that involved repeating an action in specific locations, as well as a cutscene involving a hot-air balloon ("although we didn't refer to it as a cutscene back then"). One particular film reference extended to a videogame parody, "King Kong was in and of itself a reference to Donkey Kong," Peter affirms.

One of the biggest brain teasers in *Seymour Goes To Hollywood*, however, involved the way in which the player travelled around a core part of the gaming environment. There was a baffling maze of studio lots in which it was very easy to get lost unless you whipped out a pen and paper and worked out where you'd end up as you walked in various directions.

"That was one of Fred's little babies and it was based on a text adventure game which I'm sure people are familiar with," Peter says. "They all generally had a maze where you'd go east and find a room with a door and a tree. Then you'd go east again and there'd be another room with a door and a tree. But

» The original production map of Act 1 of *Wild West Seymour* with the screens laid out and commented upon.



ATARI ST

The Atari ST version was also developed by Optimus Software and was virtually indistinguishable from its Amiga counterpart in both looks and sound. Once again, Brian Hartley created the 16-bit graphics, all drawn with a thin black line around them, and Shane O'Brien worked his coding magic.

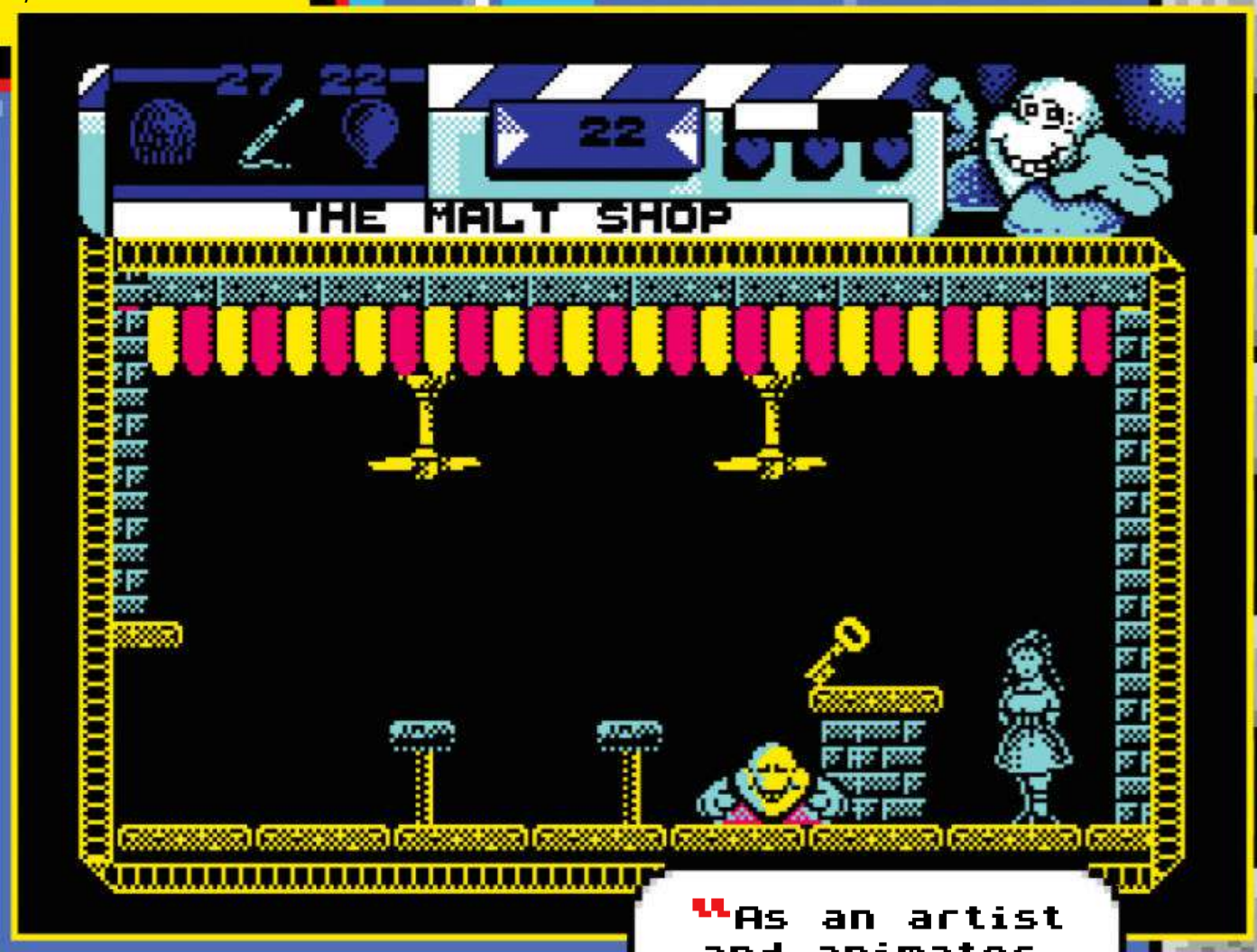
PC

Brian Hartley also provided the graphics for the DOS version but it was coded by David Spicer and Gerard Gourley created the music rather than Allister Brimble. It meant the game looked pretty similar to the Amiga and Atari ST but the sound didn't half grate after a while. Sorry.

» [C64] *Sergeant Seymour: Robot Cop* equipped the main character with a stretching arm and a cuff gun to dispatch the enemies.

there may be a subtle difference like a blade of grass and that's kind of what we were riffing on there." It was, in some respects, a subtle in-joke. "But the whole principle was that if you keep going in one direction you would never get to where you wanted to go. You'd have to change your direction so you'd go in and then come back and you'd find yourself at the start and then go back into the screen and back out and then right. *The Legend Of Zelda* had the same thing with the Lost Woods and we didn't worry about it becoming confusing because games back then were hard."

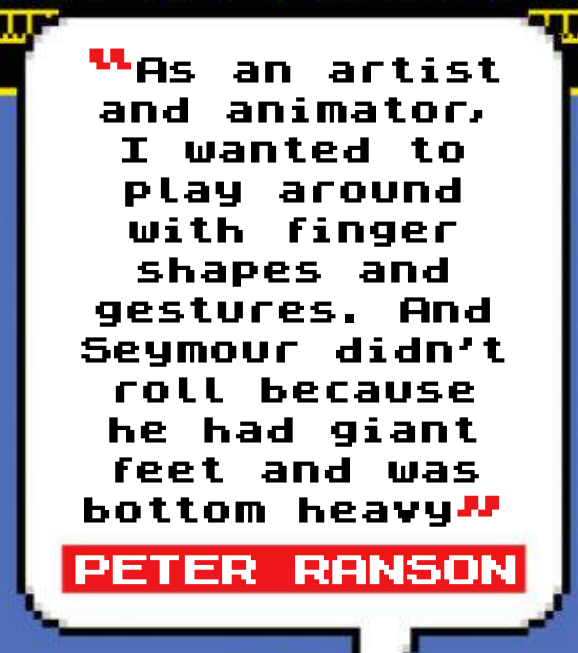
To make life a little easier and, again, to differentiate the game from *Dizzy*, however, an energy bar was introduced although it ended up in another Big Red game, *Spellbound Dizzy* too. "It gave a bit of flexibility so you could take the odd hit from a ceiling fan or a spike and survive," Peter says. Seymour was also more grounded and, unlike Dizzy, didn't bounce. "But the whole reason Dizzy did that was because neither of the Olivers was an artist – it's why Dizzy had boxing gloves," Peter continues. "As an artist and animator, I wanted to play around with finger shapes and gestures. And Seymour didn't roll because he had giant feet and was bottom heavy."

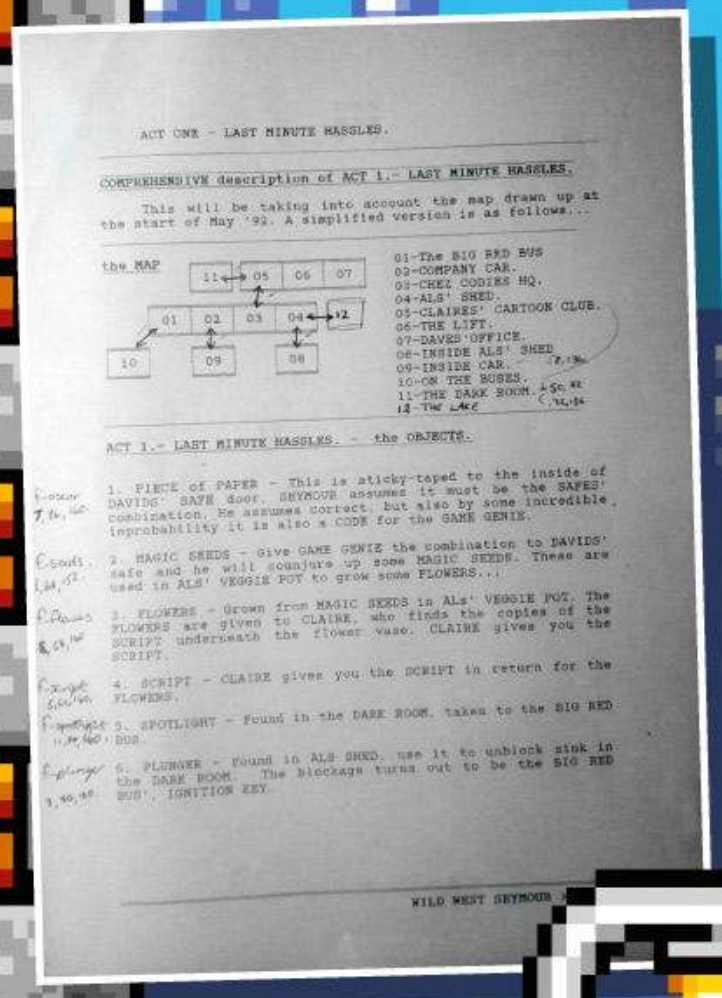


» [Amstrad CPC] Sandy from *Grease* is about to give you some parrot food. Nice.

Anyone who has played *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* will notice a discrepancy right at the start of the game. The title screen calls the game *Seymour At The Movies* – the name Big Red intended. Somewhere along the line, it was changed to *Seymour Goes To Hollywood*. "The decision hadn't been communicated to us by the time we had created the loading screen," Peter laments.

It was too late to make amends. "The cassette inlay was complete and duplication of the tapes had been done and while today you'd kind of go, OK, we'll just update and change


"As an artist and animator, I wanted to play around with finger shapes and gestures. And Seymour didn't roll because he had giant feet and was bottom heavy"
PETER RANSON


ACT ONE - LAST MINUTE HASSLES.

COMPREHENSIVE description of ACT 1.- LAST MINUTE HASSLES.

This will be taking into account the map drawn up at the start of May '92. A simplified version is as follows...

the MAP

01-The BIG RED BUS
02-COMPANY CAR.
03-CREI CODIES HQ.
04-ALS' SHED.
05-CLAIRES' CARTOON CLUB.
06-THE LIFT.
07-DAVES'OFFICE.
08-INSIDE ALS' SHED
09-INSIDE CAR.
10-ON THE BUSES.
11-THE DARK ROOM.
12-THE LAKE

ACT 1.- LAST MINUTE HASSLES. - the OBJECTS.

1. PIECE of PAPER - This is sticky-taped to the inside of DAVIDS' SAFE door. SEYMOUR assumes it must be the SAFES' combination. He assumes correct, but also by some incredible improbability it is also a CODE for the GAME GENIE.

2. MAGIC SEEDS - Give GAME GENIE the combination to DAVIDS' safe and he will conjure up some MAGIC SEEDS. These are used in ALS' VEGGIE POT to grow some FLOWERS...

3. FLOWERS - Grown from MAGIC SEEDS in ALs' VEGGIE POT. The FLOWERS are given to CLAIRE, who finds the copies of the SCRIPT underneath the flower vase. CLAIRE gives you the SCRIPT.

4. SCRIPT - CLAIRE gives you the SCRIPT in return for the FLOWERS.

5. SPOTLIGHT - Found in the DARK ROOM, taken to the BIG RED BUS.

6. PLUNGER - Found in ALS SHED, use it to unblock sink in the DARK ROOM. The blockage turns out to be the BIG RED BUS', IGNITION KEY.

WILD WEST SEYMOUR

» The script for Act 1 of *Wild West Seymour* clearly showing the objects that were to be used in this part of the game.

» [Amstrad CPC] If the key fits in *Seymour Goes To Hollywood*, the studio set shall open but actually finding those sets in this maze was no mean feat.

"There was clearly a nod and a wink to Robocop in the title but the design was an amalgamation of games I was playing at the time, notably Flicky, Rodland, Parasol Stars, Tumblepop and Pang"

PETER RANSON

it, once it had gone to master back then there was nothing that could be done. It was a case of it being a budget game and a feeling that no-one is really going to care."

He believes the new name was another in-joke. "I'm sure you can remember Frankie Goes To Hollywood," Peter says. But why 'Seymour'? Paul reckons it was down to a friend, John Leesdale popping into the office, seeing the character and saying the character looked like a Seymour. Peter says it was down to Rick Moranis who played Seymour Krelborn in *Little Shop Of Horrors*. "He was a goofy looking character and it kind of fitted what I'd created," Peter affirms.

Seymour Goes To Hollywood was supposed to be a standalone game but it ended up being bundled in a compilation called *Cartoon Collection* alongside *Treasure Island Dizzy*, *CJ Elephant Antics*, *Slightly Magic* and *Spike In Transylvania*. It got a budget release in its own right a few months later for £3.99 and reviewers picked up on its difficulty while praising the challenge. As well as achieving the ultimate goal of obtaining a film script, players needed to find 16 Oscars and dish them out to every character. Solutions to the game took up a couple of pages in computer magazines.

To promote the game, Big Red, which moved to Macclesfield, created a spin-off promo called *Seymour – Take One!* that ended up on the covertapes of *Your Sinclair* and *Amstrad Action*. Seymour's actor credentials were also exploited in non-adventure games, *Super Seymour Saves The Planet* being the first such title, taking obvious inspiration from the 1984 arcade platformer *Bomb Jack*. "The idea was to set Seymour as a character actor who could play any role," says Peter. "And it gave us an opportunity to parody games."

For *Super Seymour Saves The Planet*, Seymour resembled Dick Turpin or maybe even Batman to some extent, with a cape and mask on a mission to rid the world of pollution. Peter saw it as a chance to indulge his passion for single-screen arcade games. "I absolutely loved *Bomb Jack*," he says. "It was one of my favourite arcade games and if they made it now, I'd be all over it like a flannel."

He recalls sticking a ten pence piece in a *Bomb Jack* arcade machine on a ferry crossing from France. "I played that game on the one 10p all the way to Dover," he laughs. "It was the only arcade game I could do that with and I was actually brilliant at it. Hand on heart, I'd go to the top of the leaderboard so I wanted to make a *Bomb Jack* game with Seymour in. Of all the games made at Big Red, that was one of my favourites."

Although he believes the 8-bit versions didn't quite hit the mark, he loved the look of *Super Seymour* on the Amiga. "We didn't develop it in-house and it was one of my first experiences of being a producer, farming the coding and

HOLLYWOOD HOMAGE

SEYMOUR'S BEST MOVIE REFERENCES

TARZAN

The archetypal feral child first appeared in film in silent action adventure *Tarzan Of The Apes* (1918). In the game, Seymour needs to get past him but has trouble communicating, forcing him to find and use a translation dictionary.

DICK TRACY

Based on the US federal agent Eliot Ness, the iconic police detective was known for his tough stance against crime. Debuting in film in 1937, he appears as Rick Bracy in the game and Seymour can help him by gathering evidence.

FLASH GORDON

Flash was played by Sam J Jones in the cult 1980 space opera. In *Seymour Goes To Hollywood*, players get to visit the set of Flash Boredom and must avoid a couple of choppers in order to reach a teleporter.

GREASE

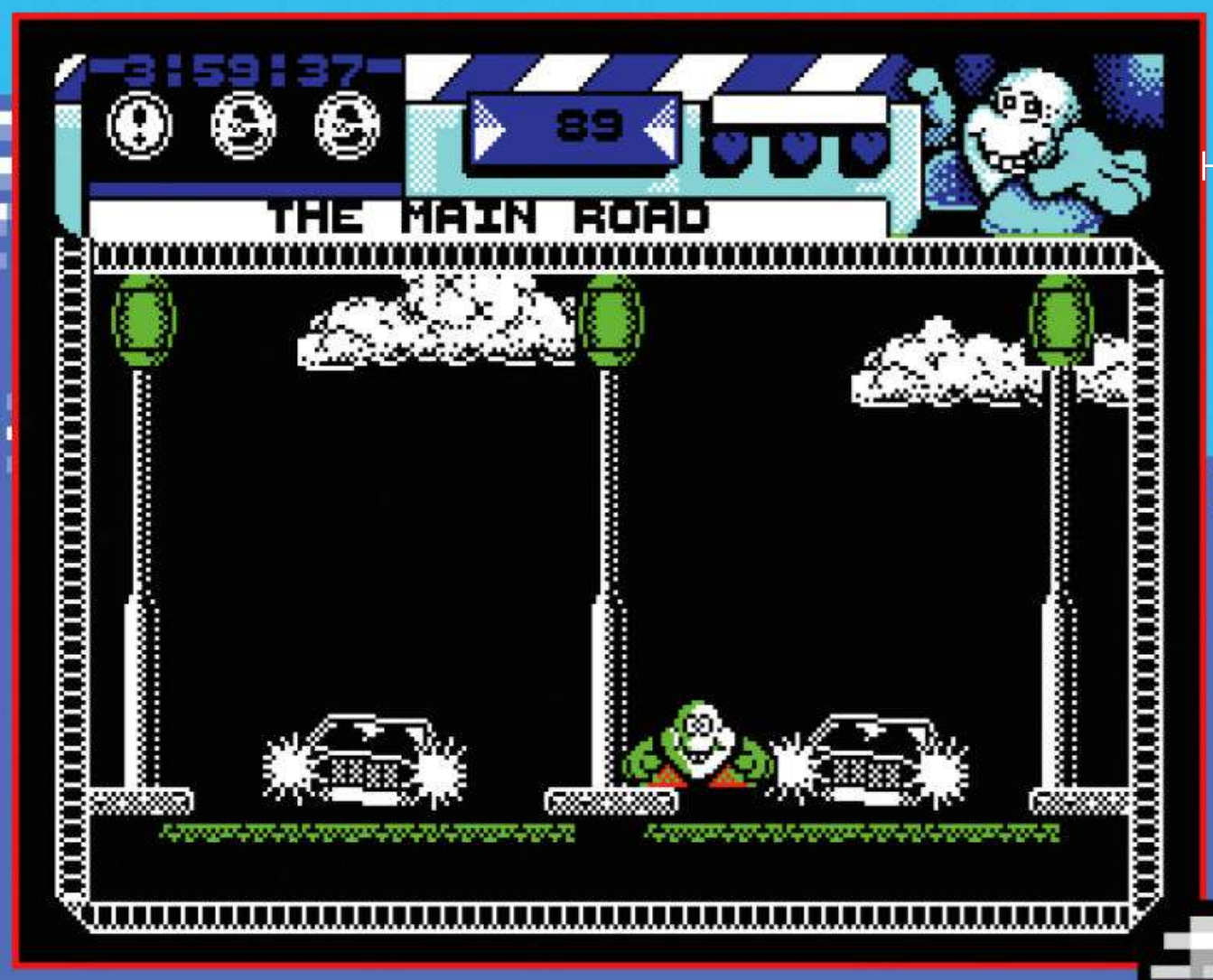
The 1978 film of the musical shone a spotlight on the developing love between Danny Zuko and Sandy Olsson. Both appear in the game on the *Grease* set. What to do with that leather jacket and those pom poms?

KING KONG

King Kong infamously climbed the Empire State Building in the 1933 monster adventure but players can catch him atop of a *Donkey Kong*-style set as he rolls barrels at you. Your task is to rescue the damsel in distress.

THE WIZARD OF OZ

MGM's 1939 classic is one of the greatest films ever made and a personal favourite of Seymour creator Peter Ranson. Enter the set as Seymour and try to cheer up Dorothy's friends with some collected goodies.



» [Amstrad CPC] Don't make the mistake of trying to cross this road in *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* before you get hold of a something to stop the traffic.

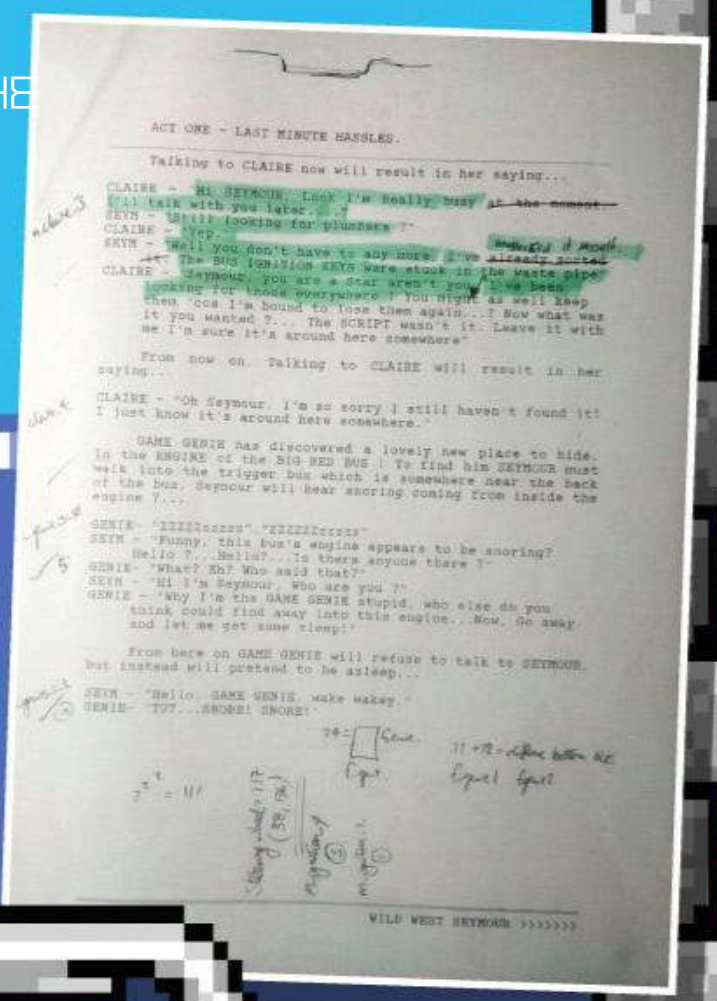
art to other teams," Peter says. Big Red also worked on a maze-like shoot-'em-up called *Sergeant Seymour: Robotcop*. "There was clearly a nod and a wink to *Robocop* in the title but the design was an amalgamation of games I was playing at the time, notably *Flicky*, *Rodland*, *Parasol Stars*, *Tumblepop* and *Pang*."

In this game, an enemy lay at the centre of the screen unleashing foes who needed to be arrested by Seymour. "I stuck a siren on his head and made it look like a police helmet," Peter laughs. "But the end result unfortunately didn't quite capture the design concept and it's something I've wanted to try again ever since. Maybe one day."

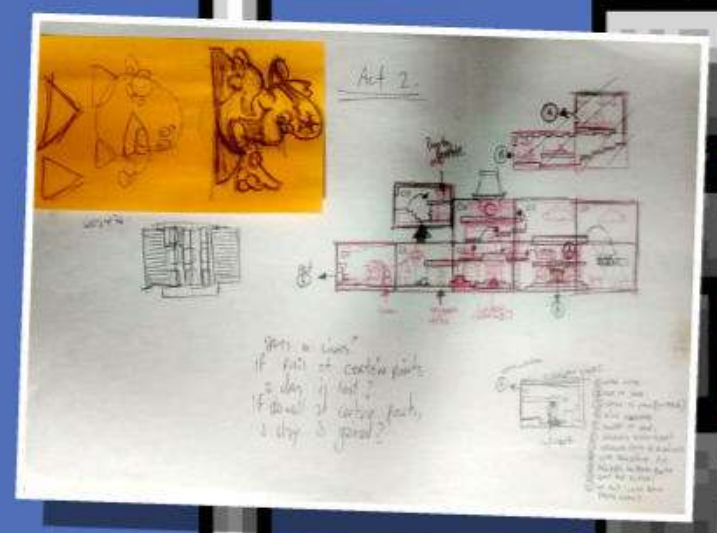
These games ended up on a compilation called *Superstar Seymour* along with *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* and *Stuntman Seymour*. The latter was a side-scrolling platformer developed by Reflective Designs for the Amstrad CPC, Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum ("the only *Seymour* game I wasn't involved with," Peter says). Reminiscent of the developer's *DJ Puff's Volcanic Caper*, it involved killing and avoiding enemies while collecting items, all while being filmed in order to fit Seymour's superstar narrative (lives were referred to as takes). "I never played it and it happened as a result of Fred and I being busy and needing to give it to another coder," says Pete. "It's OK – a simple run and jump from the looks of it."

The compilation also included another previously released game, *Wild West Seymour*, which happened to be the character's second (and final) adventure outing. As with *Seymour Goes To Hollywood*, it was massively influenced by the *Dizzy* series and it benefitted from one particular observation: that less was more when it came to Codemasters' arcade adventures

To explain, Big Red had also been cracking on with more fantasy-set *Dizzy* titles and one in particular, *Prince Of The Yolk Folk*, had gone down very well. It consisted of just 30 screens


ACT ONE - LAST MINUTE HASSLES.
Talking to CLAIRE now will result in her saying...
CLAIRE - "Hi SEYMOUR. Look I'm really busy at the moment I'll talk with you later."
SEYM - "Still looking for plumbers ?"
CLAIRE - "Yep."
SEYM - "Well you don't have to any more, I've already sorted the BIG IGNITION KEYS were stuck in the waste pipe"
CLAIRE - "Seymour, you are a dear aren't you, I've been looking for those everywhere ! You might as well keep them 'cos I'm bound to lose them again...! Now what was it you wanted ?... The SCRIPT wasn't it. Leave it with me I'm sure it's around here somewhere"
From now on. Talking to CLAIRE will result in her saying...
CLAIRE - "Oh Seymour, I'm so sorry I still haven't found it! I just know it's around here somewhere."
GAME GENIE has discovered a lovely new place to hide. In the ENGINE of the BIG RED BUS ! To find him SEYMOUR must walk into the trigger box which is somewhere near the back of the bus. Seymour will hear snoring coming from inside the engine ?...
GENIE- "ZZZZZzzzzz" "ZZZZZZzzzzz"
SEYM - "Funny, this bus's engine appears to be snoring? Hello ?...Hello?...Is there anyone there ?"
GENIE- "What? Eh? Who said that?"
SEYM - "Hi I'm Seymour, Who are you ?"
GENIE - "Why I'm the GAME GENIE stupid, who else do you think could find away into this engine...Now, Go away and let me get some sleep!"
From here on GAME GENIE will refuse to talk to SEYMOUR, but instead will pretend to be asleep...
SEYM - "Hello, GAME GENIE, wake wakey."
GENIE- "ZZZ...SNORE! SNORE!"
WILD WEST SEYMOUR >>>>>>>

» The dialogue was also carefully planned before coding began on *Wild West Seymour*.



» Maps were produced for each act of *Wild West Seymour*, as this sketch of Act 2 shows.

SHERLOCK HOLMES

When players reach the set of Sherlock Bones – a riff on Arthur C Doyle's Sherlock Holmes who first appeared in film in 1916 – they'll have to gather evidence but it's very easy to leave some fingerprints behind.

BILLY THE KID

Outlaw Billy The Kid isn't going to come easily in *Seymour Goes To Hollywood*, just as real life William H Bonney proved slippery until his death at the age of 21. His story was first told in a silent film in 1911.

FRANKEIN-STEIN

While this set is named 'Frank Einstein', there's no doubt who it's referring to: the scientist who creates a sapient creature. Seymour finds lots of body parts on his travels and needs to reach the operating theatre.

ON THE BUSES

It may be a stretch to call the bus in *Wild West Seymour* a movie star. But in placing the vehicle in the game and naming the frame *On The Buses*, it referenced the bawdy British sitcom that was spun off into movies.

STAR WARS

Seymour Goes To Hollywood avoided *Star Wars* references but *Wild West Seymour* has one as our hero mistook Duck Bodgers (a riff on Buck Rodgers) for the very familiar-sounding Ham Polo moaning about having a torn hangnail.

ROBOCOP

With a blue siren on top of his head, Seymour became *Sergeant Seymour: Robot Cop* in a game of the same name. As you can likely tell, this was a rather blatant riff on Paul Verhoeven's 1987 sci-fi action movie *Robocop*.

» [ZX Spectrum] The side-scrolling platformer, *Stuntman Seymour,* included four differently-themed movie sets

» [ZX Spectrum] *Wild West Seymour* had lots of in-jokes and some sparky dialogue which made it a lot of fun.

▶ whereas their other game, *Spellbound Dizzy*, had more than 100, and both Codemasters and Big Red felt *Prince* was better for being shorter. "We'd been super proud of *Spellbound Dizzy* but it was, in hindsight, too sprawling," Peter says. *Wild West Seymour* would take *Prince Of The Yolk Folk*'s lead.

"*Prince Of The Yolk Folk* was one of my games and it was literally designed over a weekend," says Peter. "I'd got a call from my brother on a Friday and it was ready to be coded by the following Monday. We had a guy on an internship and he just knocked it up in two weeks. We ended up releasing it as a single game after earmarking it solely for a compilation called *Dizzy's Excellent Adventures* and it was one of the best-selling *Dizzy* titles even though we'd literally banged it out to get it out of the door."

With *Wild West Seymour,* the plan was to split the game into sections, each depicting a different day. "We'd perhaps call it episodic now but it was about us being instinctive and intuitive," Peter says. Once again, the game adhered to a movie theme. "I like westerns and so I decided to set it in the wild west," Peter continues. "Plus I drew a big cowboy hat and stuck it on Seymour's head and I thought it looked funny. I knew we could use that hat because I knew the character intimately and knew we had enough space."

The game was similar to *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* in that it was about collecting items, solving puzzles and speaking to various folk. This time a baddie called El Bandeeto had destroyed a film script and scattered the equipment far and wide. Seymour had to get things back on track while exploring a film studio, town, desert and prairie, with players encountering a personal touch from the team.

Peter laughs at the memory. "We included Codemasters' farm HQ – talk about self indulgence. Bloody hell. There was a Big Red bus, receptionist Clare Lucas, Codemasters' PR Richard Eddy and a Game Genie living in the engine," he says, a reference to Codemasters' best-selling Nintendo cheat device. "I was in it too but I don't think our Paul was."

Actually, Paul was in there. He was depicted as Ham Polo. Others included Fred as Herman The Hermit and the now-*Guardian* journalist but former Big Red staffer Keith Stuart as Shy Dan. Jon Cartwright, programmer on *Prince Of The Yolk Folk*, was tasked with coding *Wild West Seymour* and he was in the game as Telegram Sam. There was talk of a cameo role for Dizzy and a discussion about putting phones around the landscape that Seymour would pick up to dial a 0898 helpline number but these didn't make the cut.

As with *Seymour Goes To Hollywood*, Peter used DPaint on the PC to produce the game's graphics, importing the results into Autodesk Animator. Jon, meanwhile, used Programmer's Development System to write and assemble

"These were the days before email and a usable internet so everything was being done on transfer disks and via printed letters and actual real post with postmen, stamps and everything"
PETER RANSON

ENERGI
THE BIG RED BUS
WHY I'M THE GAME GENIE STUPID, WHO ELSE DO YOU THINK COULD FIND A WAY INTO THIS ENGINE? NOW GO AWAY AND LET ME GET SOME SLEEP..
WHO ARE YO
BIG RED BUS

» [ZX Spectrum] As well as introducing film characters, the *Seymour* series had a special role for Codemasters' Game Genie in *Wild West Seymour*.

the code on PC before porting it to the various systems on which the game was being made (the Spectrum was the lead platform).

Some 12 weeks was set aside for *Wild West Seymour*'s programming and Seymour was allowed to be sarcastic, making for a more rounded character. But who came up with the puzzle ideas? "It was a joint effort," Peter insists. "Our Paul came up with some puzzles, I did and Jon and Fred, I'm sure, will have had some input." These pushed *Wild West Seymour* to around 96K of code on the Amstrad CPC, just 2K of which was taken up by the map which dictated which sprites would end up in a particular location. Most of the space was reserved for the graphics and there was a mammoth 255 frames of animation at one point which needed trimming.

By the time *Wild West Seymour* was released, though, the 8-bits were well and truly on the wane. Big Red was already looking to other platforms which is why, towards the end of the game's production, it moved from Macclesfield to Leamington Spa to be closer to the Codemasters' studio. "We needed to move just to be close to the hub of activity," Peter says. "These were the days before email and a usable internet so everything was being done on transfer disks and via printed letters and actual real post with postmen, stamps and everything."

For a company so embedded in the old 8-bit scene, it felt rather poignant. "There was so much happening at the time – the decline of the 8-bit era, the rise of 16-bit home computers, the advent of console gaming," Peter says. "Fred and I had started a Game Boy conversion of *Micro Machines*, Jon and I then started on Game Gear titles, *CJ's Elephant Antics* springs to mind, and Big Red started expanding with more staff.

"Before we knew it we'd tripled in size, moved offices again and were on the way to making 3D titles for Domark. For us the 8-bit era was truly over and it was all polygons, vertices, and x,y,z coordinates. My role shifted and it became a serious business. Well, for the most part."

The end of the 8-bits brought the curtain down on Seymour but could the character, given more time, have become as popular as Dizzy? "I don't think he was compelling enough, on reflection, and he was more an accident of circumstances," Peter says. "Today you'd spend months doing character design and attending committees but this was me messing around with pixels and saying, 'is that good enough?'."

As if to underline that feeling, even Peter appeared to have more affinity with Dizzy and he tantalises us with a big reveal that may well have fans of the character embark on a new adventure. "I managed to hide Dizzy in some map layouts for the odd Game Boy game I created," he reveals. "But I'm not saying which ones." Gosh, as Seymour would say.

ENERGI
IN THE MINES
PITY THIS IS SUCH A LOW BUDGET MOVIE OTHERWISE YOU'D BE ABLE TO HEAR THE ORE DETECTOR BLEEPING LIKE CRAZY!!

» [ZX Spectrum] *Wild West Seymour* was a budget game so don't expect the movies in which he starred to be any more expensively produced!

NOTABLE PUZZLES

A MIX OF BRAIN AND BRAWN WILL BE NEEDED TO SOLVE THESE PROBLEMS

THE MAZE OF STUDIOS

Each door in the studio lot of *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* needs to be unlocked so that Seymour can enter the various sets, from *Grease* to *The Wizard Of Oz*. You need to pay attention to how the sets are arranged and work out where you'll end up when going left, right and in and out. A map is essential.

FINDING CLUES

When looking for clues to help Rick Bracey, you'll end up being locked up if you contaminate the evidence with fingerprints. Wearing rubber gloves helps here but you have to be particularly careful not to accidentally remove them when handling key items which requires a bit of forward inventory planning.

BLINDING THE PIRATE

Sure, it's a gruesome thing to do but you need to get past the pirate in *Seymour Goes To Hollywood* and the only way to do this is to reunite him with Polly the Parrot. Using a parrot snack, you must lure the bird from one hut to another by carefully placing the food so that it keeps flying where you want it to go.

FINDING A KEY

Towards the start of *Wild West Seymour*, you need to get hold of a movie clapperboard and this entails getting on top of the Codies' building first. You may not figure out that you must leap across a couple of trees and a cloud with some well-timed jumps. And it's frustrating!

KEEP GOING

This could apply to how you need to generally approach the game: perseverance tends to win out in the end but, in *Wild West Seymour*, you end up on a Railroad to Nowhere and you seem to be looping the same scene-over-and-over. Keep going though. It's a long walk but you will reach a destination.

5200 Controller

» **PLATFORM:** ATARI 5200 » **RELEASED:** 1982
» **COST:** $50 (LAUNCH), £30+ (TODAY, BOXED), £10+ (TODAY, UNBOXED)

The Atari 5200 controller was a bold move away from the simplicity of the Atari 2600 joystick, which featured just one button and an eight direction digital joystick. The new controller featured an analogue joystick for full 360 degree movement, as well as two fire buttons on each side of the joystick to allow both left-handed and right-handed players to use it equally well. A numerical keypad was provided to allow for easier selection of options and provide additional game design opportunities, and the introduction of start, pause and reset buttons were a big step towards making the gaming experience that little bit more streamlined.

Unfortunately, what could have been a revolutionary controller design quickly attracted the ire of players. The joystick did not automatically centre in the way that modern analogue joysticks do, making many games harder to play than they might otherwise have been. Worse yet, the controller gained a reputation for being particularly unreliable. All components were equally liable to fail, so maintaining controllers was far more trouble than it was worth. Today, Atari 5200 enthusiasts tend to recommend the use of an alternative controller – either the Wico joystick with a keypad, or a more modern custom controller design. *

5200 controller fact

■ Early models of the Atari 5200 featured four control ports, allowing for four-player games to be supported, but later models brought this down to two in order to reduce manufacturing costs.

ESSENTIAL GAME
ROBOTRON: 2084

What's the solution to a joystick that doesn't automatically centre itself? A game where you are constantly on the run, of course. *Robotron: 2084* is exactly that kind of game – since you're always pushing in one direction or another, the joystick's most notable flaw becomes far easier to live with. Better yet, there's an official controller coupler that allows you to play the game with two joysticks, using one to move and one to aim your shots, just as Eugene Jarvis intended. It's usually a delight on any platform, but *Robotron: 2084* is particularly outstanding on the Atari 5200.

SYSTEM SUPPLIED BY
EVAN AMOS

ULTIMATE GUIDE

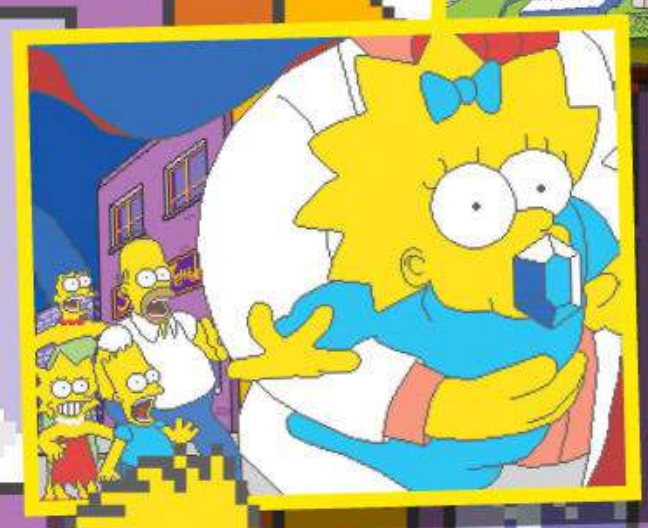
THE SIMPSONS

LONG BEFORE TELEVISION'S MOST ICONIC FAMILY BECAME A HOUSEHOLD NAME, THEY WERE A HIT IN THE ARCADES. SO JOIN US AS WE LOOK BACK AT THE SIMPSON FAMILY'S CLASSIC GAMING BEATDOWN ON THE STREETS OF SPRINGFIELD

WORDS BY ALAN WEN

» [Arcade] The arcade's intro faithfully replicates the show's opening sequence – the bios however are somewhat lacking in substance.

» [Arcade] Standing next to each other for about a second, two players can trigger co-op attacks, which vary depending on the characters.



REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

THE JAPANESE VERSION MADE THINGS EASIER WITH MORE PICK-UPS

The Japanese version of *The Simpsons* included a notable number of differences from other versions, as a result of more development time to appeal to the Japanese market. The key difference appears to be making more concessions to make the game easier so that players weren't always reaching for more coins.

This included having more items in levels such as weapons or food, the latter found by hitting hidden parts of a level and not just the trees, and if you already had a max health bar, you would actually accumulate up to two additional health bars. Weapons like the slingshot meanwhile received a buff that made them one-shot an enemy whereas you still had to hit enemies three times to take them down in the international version. A brand-new weapon includes mini-nukes that can be thrown to take out everyone on screen (though also damages you if you're too close).

Also overhauled was the scoring system, where internationally *The Simpsons* followed the scoring system in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* arcade game with each defeated enemy counting as just one point. The Japanese version however gives you a score of 100 points for defeating basic enemies but other enemies including bosses net more points. It also provided additional ways to earn more points, from a vitality bonus at the end of a level based on the amount of health you have left, to a time bonus added to the bonus games.

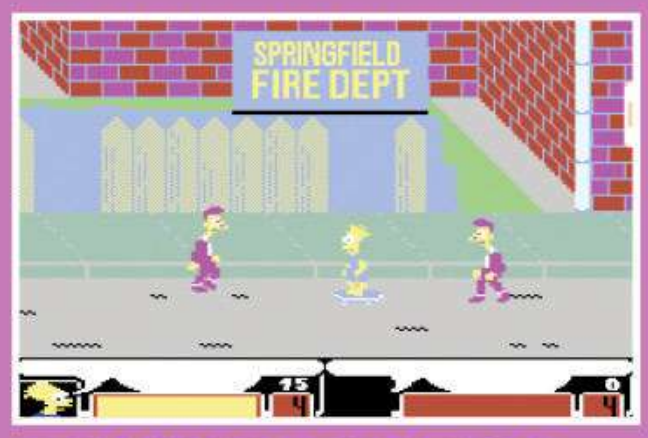
Considering the availability of *The Simpsons* in the early 1990s, at the time exclusive to satellite television in the UK, the majority of the public's awareness of the show starring America's dysfunctional nuclear family was through other merchandise. None made as much an impression as the excellent multiplayer arcade beat-'em-up that could be found in bars, bowling alleys and shopping centres, as well as the London Trocadero, one of the few places to actually host a four-player cabinet.

Technically, *The Simpsons* isn't the first game to be made based on the series. It was beaten just a month by the NES release of *Bart Vs The Space Mutants* – the show's perception as a children's cartoon was no doubt an influence on many other licensed efforts focusing solely on the mischievous ten year old. Nonetheless, Konami's game was the first to properly incorporate the whole Simpson family as players took control of Homer, Marge, Bart and Lisa in a side-scrolling scrap to rescue baby Maggie.

The arcade hardware also ensured that, from the graphics to voice samples that feature the original voice cast, this was a game that most accurately represented the show, right from recreating its intro – Danny Elfman's main theme aside however, the rest of the game music is composed by Norio Hanzawa. Not that this is necessarily a faithful adaptation. As far as Simpsons lore goes, the plot is completely ludicrous. The evil scheming nuclear power plant owner Mr Burns is an obvious choice as a final boss, but why would his assistant Smithers be robbing a jewellery store in town, which leads to the Simpson baby's accidental kidnapping? Ultimately, it's just an excuse to

CONVERSION CAPERS

TAKING THE FAMILY OUT OF THE ARCADE



COMMODORE 64

Getting an 8-bit machine to run this arcade title was always going to involve huge concessions, the result being that the Simpsons look even more primitive than their early designs for *The Tracey Ullman Show*. Gameplay is limited to two players while there's also fewer characters on-screen including enemies and NPCs.

PC

Also handled by Novotrade, the MS-DOS port is a little closer to the arcade version, at least in terms of the bright cartoon colours compared to the Commodore's washed out palette. Again, there are no voices, gameplay is limited to two players, while character art still looks crude compared to how Groening drew them.

PS3/XBOX 360

This digital release on PSN and XBLA from Backbone Entertainment is the arcade-perfect port fans had been waiting for, which includes four-player multiplayer for the first time, as well as the Japanese version upon beating the game once. Sadly, both releases have since been delisted from the digital stores.

DEVIL BART

» [Arcade] Perhaps foreseeing the episode 'Homie The Clown' later in the series, you'll find plenty of phoney Krustys in Krustyland.

» [Arcade] Springfield Butte includes a bigfoot enemy based on when Homer was mistaken for Bigfoot in 'The Call Of The Simpsons'.

GRAMPA

MARTIN

SANTA'S LITTLE HELPER

get the Simpsons out on the streets to beat up a swarm of (hired) goons across eight levels based on the town of Springfield.

A couple years earlier, Konami had already released arcade beat-'em-up *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, a terrific use of a licence of yet another popular animated series. Essentially, it was a case of the development team repackaging that formula for *The Simpsons*, not necessarily that straightforward when they don't fight like Leo, Donnie, Mikey and Raph. Yet despite little more than buttons to attack and jump, controlling each family member feels distinct thanks to the animations. While Homer would go full melee with punches and kicks, Bart has his skateboard, Marge whacks enemies with her vacuum cleaner, while Lisa strangely attacks with a skipping rope (surely her saxophone would have made more sense).

Helping you out are also a dollop of food items to restore health, as well as weapons to bring out more damage, from a slingshot to a mallet. Better yet is how some of these items come from the many colourful citizens of Springfield. These cameos are undeniably part of the game's charm, as brief or as random as they sometimes may be – who would imagine you'd get a helping hand from school bully Nelson Muntz or evil genius Sideshow Bob?

Admittedly, the arcade game was developed just as the second season of the show was airing, so many long-recurring characters had yet to make their debut, though it's interesting that Dr Marvin Monroe and Bleeding Gums Murphy, both canonically dead in subsequent years, do make an appearance. But it's also easy to nitpick what other familiar characters and places don't make the cut. For instance, we see Principal Skinner talking to teacher's pet Martin

» [Arcade] Many objects can be picked up as weapons, including animals like the Simpsons' pets, as well as Blinky the three-eyed fish.

BONUS FUN

THEY DID THE MASH, THE BUTTON MASH

Konami is no stranger to button mashing fun, as demonstrated by two bonus levels in *The Simpsons* offering a bit of player competition.

The first takes place just after the first level as you race to see who can blow up a big balloon fastest. The second one happens after you've beaten the Dreamland level as you slap your Simpson silly to wake them up to resume their search for Maggie.

Prince in the first level but Springfield Elementary School is only seen via the Dreamland level, while Apu and the Kwik-E-Mart sadly aren't featured at all.

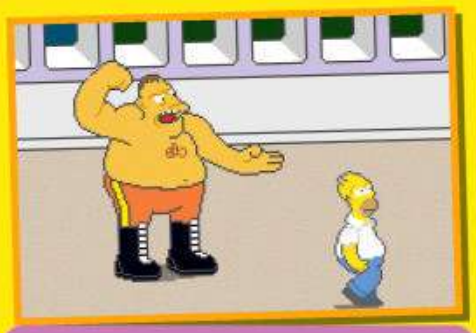
Even with certain cast omissions, what's peculiar is that Konami rummaged through Matt Groening's earlier comic book work Life in Hell, bringing its anthropomorphised white rabbits into the game as enemies, and also featuring them at the start of each level. It does provide an opportunity for the developers to incorporate a gag that Groening always had but could never execute in the show – that Marge has rabbit ears under her blue hair, which you can see in one of her attack animations as well as when she's electrocuted.

For those who didn't yet have access to the show, a trip to the arcade playing as the Simpsons beating up bad guys in Springfield was the next best thing, as a quick and simple romp referencing locations like Moe's Tavern or episodes like 'The Call Of The Simpsons' in carnival-esque glee. Of course, your enjoyment also came down to how far you could get and the coins you had on you at the time.

While it's possible to finish the game in 45 minutes, most players were lucky if they could get past the first level on a single credit. When it comes down to it, health pick-ups are in short supply and bosses were sponges that would make short work of your own health bar. You had a better chance of getting further with another player to help out and bust out co-op attacks. If you could find a cabinet to have all four Simpsons on screen at once, even better.

BOSS RUSH

THE BADDIES TO BEAT UP AS YOU GO AFTER MAGGIE



PROFESSOR WERNER VON BRAWN

Fans might recall this wrestler's appearance from the beginning of 'Bart The Daredevil', now dropping in to give the Simpsons a bridge beatdown.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

There's a nearby bowling ball you can chuck at him for early damage. Otherwise use flying kicks and quickly dart away from his tough flailing arms.

KRUSTY BALLOON

Modelled after the famous TV clown, the Krusty Balloon wasn't just a getaway vehicle for Smithers, it has a life all of its own.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

It's best to jump kick into it while avoiding its arms. Be warned, it bounces around the screen after getting hit four times before trying to crush you.

TWO GOONS

These two keep tabs on you in the first level before running away. The gloves come off once you reach Moe's underground tavern.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

The short one piggybacks on the tall one (and also gets used as a weapon) though they can also come at you separately. But it's fairly easy once one goes down.

DRUNK MAN

Who's this drunk sleeping behind the bar? Not any of the patrons we recognise from the show, but he likes to start a fire.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

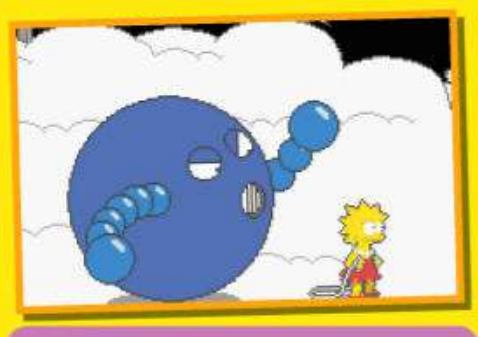
He likes throwing punches but it's easy to knock him on his butt. Just be careful as his fiery alcoholic breath can scorch your character at quite a range.

BEAR

This bear can be seen escaping from Krustyland earlier on, though it's also based on the bear that is seen in 'The Call Of The Simpsons'.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

The bear's attacks, which includes rolling at you, are pretty easy to dodge. More troubling is having to watch out for falling boulders at the same time.



BOWLING BALL

While not a reference to 'Life On The Fast Lane', this is nonetheless a menacing sentient bowling ball who also sprouts limbs.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

It starts off just rolling at you but then grows arms (or feet) and jumps up to pounce you. Later it even fires bowling pin missiles, so watch out for those.

KABUKI WARRIOR

After fighting through a Japanese set of Springfield's TV studio, you're met with this Kabuki warrior as he hops about the stage spinning his naginata.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

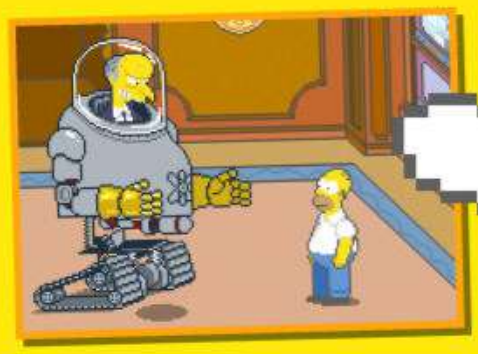
You'll have to dodge his naginata but he can easily be knocked down. Watch out for the ninjas who pop out behind the screen as backup.

WAYLON SMITHERS

This cackling cape-wearing version of Smithers is nothing like fans have come to know. His blue hair is based on the character's miscolouring in his first appearance on the show.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

It's best to keep your distance as he hurls a lot of bombs at you that explode on impact. But he also occasionally drops one that you can throw back.



MR BURNS

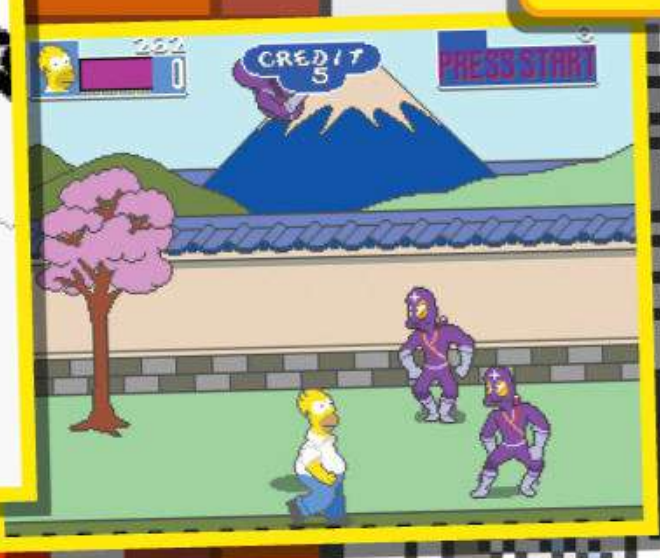
Aware that beating up an old man would have been an anticlimax, Mr Burns balances things out by fighting in a robot suit.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Lots of credits as this is just one big damage sponge. Across three phases, Burns' suit throws out stretchy arms, lasers, and even mini-nukes!

» [Arcade] In a game filled with cameos, the absence of Kent Brockman in the TV studio level is the most curious omission.

» [Arcade] While Devil Bart appears whenever a character loses all their health, they actually become enemies in the Dreamland level.



» [Arcade] While grapples aren't part of your move set, enemies can grab you, in which case you'll need to wiggle yourself free.

As much as people's fond memories of *The Simpsons* helps glaze over the cheapness of its coin-guzzling difficulty (which was at least toned down for the later Japanese release), the hindsight of over 30 seasons is also likely to turn every fan into Comic Book Guy poking into the holes of every questionable omission or slapdash character placement. Why is Otto the bus driver handing out soft drinks at Krustyland? And why on earth does Smithers have a high-pitched cackle of a pantomime villain? Had Konami been granted the licence perhaps even just a couple seasons later, one might imagine a game that made use of even more of Springfield's characters and locations in more thoughtful ways.

More bizarre is the penultimate level, where the news studio eventually leads to a Japanese set that throws in ninjas with shurikens and pink sakura trees – like an American parody of ancient Japanese culture, but from a Japanese developer. It's an absurd kind of irony for sure, though also made before the show has its own questionable depictions of Japanese culture over the years, like 'One Fish, Two Fish, Blowfish, Blue Fish' and 'Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo'.

As the show's popularity continued growing in the Nineties and Noughties, we'd see even more cracks of the licence, including another arcade effort from Konami, *The Simpsons Bowling*, which was played with a 3D trackball. Naturally, the scope there was far more limiting, and its use of 3D graphics had a kind of uncanniness reminiscent of that Treehouse Of Horror episode. In 2009, EA would even attempt to follow up the 1991 classic with its own Simpsons arcade beat-'em-up for iOS, though it was hampered by being only single player, and has since been delisted. On the face of it, this was a licence that rarely was used well over the years, even if *GTA* clone *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* does have its cult following. But after all this time, for those who want the unadulterated experience of getting all the family together for a scrap, Konami's *The Simpsons*, despite its flaws, still remains the most memorable use of the licence.

Blazing Rangers

Working on modern platforms is everyday business for Japanese programmer Karu_Gamo, but his new firefighting action game is a red hot NES release that showcases a burning passion for Eighties arcade classics

Words by Nick Thorpe

Any retro gamer knows that it's easy to feel sentimental about a favourite piece of hardware, and for developer Karu_Gamo, it's the Famicom that earned his affection. "It was like one of my friends back in the days. As I grew up, more and more wonderful games appeared on the system. It felt as if we grew up together," says the programmer of *Blazing Rangers*, whose recent work includes contributions to Ancient's *Protect Me Knight* series across Xbox 360, 3DS and Switch. "Around the time I became a game developer, PlayStation and Sega Saturn were the popular gaming consoles, but I still had the desire to make a Famicom game someday. Now I've finally followed that desire."

Well, "finally" may not be strictly accurate, as this isn't his first time doing so. "Around 2010 I planned to develop a Famicom-style game, but at that point, I didn't have the needed knowledge yet," he explains. In 2015 he discovered that making Famicom games without official development hardware was possible, but struggled to transition from C# and C++. "It was really difficult for me to learn the Assembly language, but with the help of Twitter followers and other people who helped me with game development, I have somehow managed to begin developing games for Famicom." Karu_Gamo's first Famicom project was a game titled *Amazon's Running Diet*. "This game is distributed for free on the internet and was released to commemorate the third anniversary of *Protect Me*

» [NES] Once you've started spraying water, you can rotate to face targets at different angles.

» [NES] Every step uses a metre of hose pipe, so efficient routes are key to making the best use of them.

» [NES] The hose is limited in length, but it can be extended until the end of the stage if you collect power-ups.

» [NES] It's possible to extinguish fires with or without the hose, but the hose is powerful and has unlimited water.

IN THE KNOW

- **» PUBLISHER:** FIRST PRESS GAMES
- **» DEVELOPER:** KARU_GAMO
- **» RELEASE:** TBC
- **» PLATFORM:** NES
- **» GENRE:** ACTION

» [NES] As walls explode, monsters attack and fire spreads, your hose can be damaged, cutting you off from a useful tool.

» [NES] When the time limit expires, the game continues but a raging inferno breaks out. Rescuing kids replenishes your time.

Knight for Nintendo 3DS in 2017," he explains. "It's an action game with simple gameplay and content that was created using the MMC3 mapper, which allowed for large sprite animations and parallax scrolling."

ow Karu_Gamo has created *Blazing Rangers* as an independent production, to be published by First Press Games. In this arcade-style action game, players take control of Popo and Mimi and try to rescue children from burning buildings, while struggling with limited hose length, locked doors and the constant spread of fire. In practice it feels much like an early Eighties arcade game, and the programmer found himself particularly inspired by a Namco classic. "*Dig Dug* was the first videogame that left a strong impact on me. I was surprised about the dynamic development of building a maze by myself, instead of a fixed maze like in *Pac-Man*," he explains. After *Amazon's Running Diet*, making a game with that kind of concept was foremost in his mind. "To make the concept more dynamic, I imagined that the maze that I would build could change even further. That gave me the idea of a fire site. Flames change their appearance like a living thing and a fire site is a setting where various accidents occur coinciding with the direction of it."

The concept also helped to solve another problem. "The most difficult thing about making a game with retro hardware and its limitations is how to communicate to the player the way and purpose of playing," Karu_Gamo tells us. "That's why the player is a firefighter, facing children in danger, flames and monsters. Everyone will know what they'll need to do in this game's setting." Of course, the concept is simple and the game is easy to pick up, but success is another matter. "As the game progresses, even a small mistake has the potential to make the situation worse, and when you notice it the surroundings might have already become a massive fire hazard."

Interestingly, Karu_Gamo has chosen to create *Blazing Rangers* using the most basic functions of Nintendo's 8-bit hardware. "Large capacity games using MMC are attractive to do, but many people will first think of *Super Mario Bros* when they are asked what a Famicom-like game would look like. The goal of *Blazing Rangers* was to create such a classic Famicom title, that you can be absorbed in even if you play it in these days [of the modern gaming industry]," he explains. "Since ancient times, Japan has an aesthetic sense of 'wabi-sabi'. It is an idea that you can create a big and rich world from what is small and lacking. Famicom games, especially those on Mapper 0, are basically a container for 'wabi-sabi'."

Of course, Karu_Gamo didn't do everything alone. "I don't really have talent to make music, so I decided to ask Hydden to compose music for the game. He loves NES music, knows all about NES sound sources, and provided the perfect musical scores for this game," he explains, further noting that Hydden and Yuzo Koshiro provided advice on implementing the game's sound driver. "We would also like to thank Mr Yukita and Mr Ousuke for serving as the main theme vocals for the CD and trailer. The passionate main theme they sing is a very good representation of the game. We are also very grateful to the test players of this game for their feedback and the staff of First Press Games for supporting the sales and promotion."

Blazing Rangers is scheduled for release in the near future for Famicom and NES. To find out more and order the game, visit firstpressgames.com. ✱

» [NES] You don't necessarily need to grab every item to finish a stage and rescue all the kids.

WHO'S WHO?

MEET THE LIFE-SAVING HEROES OF BLAZING RANGERS

If you ever find yourself without a hose, this boy in the white uniform is the character you want to be, as he can pump water from the ground faster than his colleague Mimi. "Popo has got a fairly slow default movement speed, but is strong. Even if he saves many children at once, his movement does not slow down by a lot," Karu_Gamo explains. That puts him at an advantage in the late stages with more children to rescue, and the programmer suggests that in two-player mode he's the character that's best suited to performing rescues.

If you're looking to build up a surplus of time in the early stages of Mode B, where your time limit carries over between stages, Mimi's the right woman for the job. "Mimi has a very fast movement speed, but is less powerful. Each kid she takes with her will slow down her movement significantly," says Karu_Gamo. That extra speed really helps when the monsters start getting more aggressive too, making the difference between losing lives and saving lives. If you're dividing labour in multiplayer, he suggests that Mimi is the one you want to put on firefighting duty.

» [NES] If you get killed, all of the children you'd picked up but not yet delivered to the exit will die too.

THE STORY OF Special Reserve

ITS ADVERTS WERE UBIQUITOUS ACROSS 1990S GAMING MAGAZINES, BUT WHERE DID SPECIAL RESERVE COME FROM? AND WHY IS THERE A PICTURE OF GROTBAGS IN THIS FEATURE?

Words by Lewis Packwood

Image courtesy of Dave Carlos.

» Dave Carlos with Grotbags the witch at a Domark game launch in the Eighties. On the right is Sally Newman, wife of the late Graeme Kidd.

Dave Carlos decided to quit teaching in 1984. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government was determined to shake up the education system, and as a union rep, Dave had led his school out on strike in protest at the changes. But ultimately, he decided he couldn't continue in his chosen vocation under the political regime of the time. "I felt that I couldn't be the kind of teacher I wanted to be," he says. "And I didn't want to be the kind of teacher that turned up every day, took his pay, and went home with no further thought."

He decided to switch careers completely, focusing instead on his growing love for home computers. Back in 1980, Dave had been asked by a parent whether he could teach their child to program their newly purchased Sinclair ZX81. Despite having no background in computing, Dave rose to the task – and quickly became hooked, soon buying a ZX81 for himself and later upgrading to a BBC Micro. He became so addicted to home computing that he ended up taking a Saturday job in a Leeds computer shop in addition to his Monday to Friday teaching career. By this point, he had also begun writing articles for computing journals, as well as creating several type-in programs for magazines.

At around the time he decided to leave teaching, Dave heard that the editor position at the magazine *Home Computing Weekly* was about to open up. "So I made a play for it," he says, and after some intense lobbying, "eventually they said, 'OK, you can have the job'." The role meant moving his family all the way down south to Essex, but ultimately it was short-lived. After a frenzied ten-month period of weekly deadlines, including a hair-raising moment when Dave was called by the printers two hours before the presses were due to roll to be told that five pages of the magazine were missing, he felt it was time for another change. This time, it was a move into the nascent world of videogame PR.

During his 1985 stint at *Home Computing Weekly*, Dave felt that "the kind of PR that was coming at me was not the quality of PR that I would want to put out" – and he became convinced he could do a better job. He began by forming the company Solutions PR with a colleague, but the partnership quickly dissolved, and instead he set up on his own as Inter-

Image courtesy of Dave Carlos.

» "Because of the *Confidential* thing, the first exhibition we did, Tony came up with the idea that we were all going to dress up as the Blues Brothers," says Dave. Even Dave's son got in on the act, as seen here.

» Tony Rainbird bought Inter-Mediates from Dave Carlos and turned the PR firm into a mail-order company. He's now director of the internet service provider Freeola.

» Ali Gray started work as a staff writer at Special Reserve's Sawbridgeworth office in 2000. "It could be stressful at times, but I only really have fond memories of the place now," he says.

» Richard Hull worked as a writer at Special Reserve between 2002 and 2005, mostly penning game reviews. "We sort of took the tack that we weren't going to lie, but obviously it was more of a marketing exercise than a reviewing exercise," he says.

Strictly Confidential

INSIDE THE OFFICIAL SECRETS MAGAZINE

» Special Reserve evolved out of the mail-order operation that Inter-Mediates set up to distribute Silverbird games as part of its management of the Silver Club. Image courtesy of Richard Hewison.

» Former *Crash* editor Graeme Kidd worked on some of the later Silver Club newsletters after leaving Newsfield. Image courtesy of Richard Hewison.

» Dave Carlos (left) hands over a cheque to John Jarratt, winner of a Domark Treasure Hunt. Image courtesy of Dave Carlos.

Mediates Ltd, the firm that would go on to form the backbone of Special Reserve.

Domark was one of Dave's earliest clients, and the first game he promoted was *Friday The 13th*, which he found a challenge. "I didn't like that one very much," he says. "My Christian beliefs didn't sit terribly easily with that. It was quite a baptism of fire to be straight in with a project that you didn't actually terribly much like, but you have to be professional about these things." Despite Dave's misgivings, Domark was pleased enough with his work that they gave him several campaigns to handle over the next few years, and Inter-Mediates steadily grew.

Then one day, Dave had an encounter at the offices of the publisher Telecomsoft that would end up changing the trajectory of Inter-Mediates completely. "They'd just started Silverbird," he says, "and in a box in the office, there was a whole pile of tear-off cards from cassette inlays." These were applications to join the Silver Club. For £1.99, members would receive a free Silverbird game as well as regular newsletters. Intrigued, Dave asked what the publisher planned to do with the applications – and then made a spontaneous pitch to run the club on behalf of Silverbird. Citing his magazine editor background, he argued he'd be the perfect candidate to create a regular newsletter, and

■ *Confidential* debuted in 1988, a magazine dedicated to adventure games that was sent out to *Official Secrets* members every other month. It was put together under the watchful eye of former *Crash* editor Graeme Kidd, and *Confidential* staff writer Nick Walkland has fond memories of him, "He was my first publisher and editor, and I learned more from him in a couple of months at Inter-Mediates than from most people in publishing since."

Graeme asked Nick to work on *Confidential* after being impressed by Nick's adventure-game fanzine *Orcsbane*, and along with a handful of other writers, they made the *Official Secrets* periodical into something really rather special. Nick says that Graeme focused on delivering high-quality features and interviews, but "he also wanted some of the laissez-faire edge of a fanzine to appeal to fans and for a subscription club. He demanded professional design and editorial standards yet with a home-grown monochrome feel".

The process of actually putting the magazine together wasn't always an easy task, though. "We were one of the first to use desktop publishing with a system by Letraset," recalls Nick, "but when it went to film, it was wonky and not printable, so we had to cut and paste all the images and text as we would have done beforehand. Letraset DTP was binned and we tried the outrageously expensive Quark Express – which changed magazine design afterwards." *Confidential* ran for around just two years, delivering some fantastic and often very funny content before the short-lived Official Secrets club was quietly wound down. Nick went on to freelance for *Amiga Format*, then took jobs at the magazines *Games-X* and *Control*, before working on the TV show *Games World* at Hewland International.

» "I randomly remember scanning a fish from a fish food canister, turning it to black and white, and duplicating it on a spread in the first issue," says Nick. "It was bonkers but looked great."

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» This spread in issue two looks at the development of *Myth*, the Magnetic Scrolls game that would be given away to all Official Secrets members.

» Nick says that a highlight of his time on *Confidential* was "getting to interview some of my adventure game heroes, including the secretive Level 9 guys – the UK equivalent of Infocom in the world of text adventures".

» Mel Croucher, the pioneer behind the UK's first games company, Automata, penned this comedy problem page in issue one.

Shopping Time

REMEMBERING SPECIAL RESERVE'S STORES

■ Although Inter-Mediates began in Essex, the company expanded to Sawbridgeworth in Hertfordshire, taking offices in the Maltings centre alongside a railway line. "We got it because it was cheap," recalls Dave Carlos. "We started there, and we took a third floor little office, up in the eves. And we kept on letting small rooms, and basically it got to the point where Tony said, 'You know, we should actually rent the whole of this, because we're taking up so much of it right now, let's try and do a better deal with the landlord'. And that's what we did, we took over the whole of that end of the Maltings – and that became the shop."

After gaining success in the mail-order field, opening a shop seemed the logical next step – the merchandise was already there in the warehouse, it was just a case of creating a storefront to sell it. Then again, it was a distinctly no-frills operation in the early days. Richard Hull, who worked at Special Reserve in the early Noughties, remembers visiting the Sawbridgeworth shop as a ten year old. "Basically, if you were told it was the stock room, you'd not have been surprised, because it was just sort of stacks of stuff on shelves," he says. But over the years, it developed into what he calls "a fairly massive, pretty impressive shop", with dozens of offices above it for buyers, tech support and the website. In the following decade the single shop became a chain, with stores opening in nearby towns like Chelmsford, Basildon, Upminster and Egham, as well as Bristol and Nottingham. But sadly, all of them closed after Special Reserve shut down in 2005.

Images from Google Street View

» These Google Street View images from July 2008 and July 2019 show the steady decay of the Special Reserve sign above the Bristol store, which closed in 2005.

PROTECT YOUR VALUABLE PC
From only £9.99 fool! click here
At the Special Reserve Discount Network we sell to everyone (Hooray!)
All our customers are very important to us. But our members get more!
CATALOGUE
INTERNET
STORES

» The Special Reserve website circa 2001. Note the plethora of sister websites selling everything from mobile phones to domain names.

he would also handle the membership applications and the distribution of free games. The publisher agreed to pay Inter-Mediates £2.50 per club member, and a deal was struck.

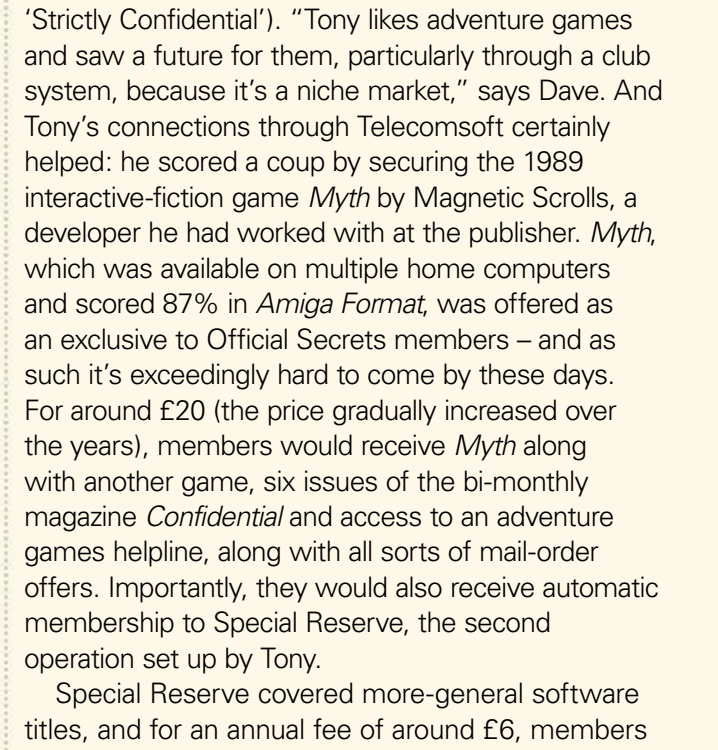
Over the coming months, the number of Silver Club members swelled to around 14,000. Importantly, the newsletter doubled as a Silverbird catalogue that sold games via mail order, all of which were sent out by Inter-Mediates on behalf of Telecomsoft. "We effectively became a mail-order fulfilment house alongside a PR company," says Dave.

This is where Tony Rainbird enters the picture. Dave had met Tony when he helped to promote the launch of the Rainbird label at Telecomsoft, but Tony left the company in late 1986, and Dave asked him to join Inter-Mediates. "He's a finance guy," explains Dave. "And I'm the opposite of a finance guy. I'm a creative guy. I am useless with business finance, and I needed somebody who was going to be doing management accounts. Tony was able to provide that kind of skill." Then, after working at Inter-Mediates for a while, Dave recalls that Tony made him a proposition. "He just said to me, if ever you get to the stage where you want a partner or you're about to sell some of the business, I'm interested."

Dave eventually took Tony up on the offer. Towards the end of the Eighties, Inter-Mediates was thriving, but it needed more capital to expand, and Dave was worried about overextending. "Long story short, my wife and I didn't really want to put more guarantees into the business," he says. "And so I went to Tony and said, 'Right, well, you said you were interested in buying a bit of it, how about buying all of it?.'"

Tony raised some of the cash through a silent partner, and he told Dave his plans for Inter-Mediates. "He said to me, the PR business is OK, but the bulk of the profit is coming out of Silverbird, out of that club, and it's that I'm buying the business for. Not for Silverbird per se, but for the fact that you have already a fully functional newsletter, software sales and fulfilment operation. That's what I'm buying, and what I'm going to build off of." After staying on for a few months to help with the handover, Dave left to join a Christian missionary society in Birmingham.

The Silver Club didn't last long after Tony's acquisition of Inter-Mediates – it was closed by Telecomsoft at around the time the publisher was acquired by MicroProse in 1989 – but Tony pressed ahead by setting up two new mail-order operations. The first was an adventure-game club called Official Secrets, which had its own dedicated magazine (see 'Strictly Confidential'). "Tony likes adventure games and saw a future for them, particularly through a club system, because it's a niche market," says Dave. And Tony's connections through Telecomsoft certainly helped: he scored a coup by securing the 1989 interactive-fiction game *Myth* by Magnetic Scrolls, a developer he had worked with at the publisher. *Myth*, which was available on multiple home computers and scored 87% in *Amiga Format*, was offered as an exclusive to Official Secrets members – and as such it's exceedingly hard to come by these days. For around £20 (the price gradually increased over the years), members would receive *Myth* along with another game, six issues of the bi-monthly magazine *Confidential* and access to an adventure games helpline, along with all sorts of mail-order offers. Importantly, they would also receive automatic membership to Special Reserve, the second operation set up by Tony.



» This Special Reserve advert appeared in *Sega Power* issue 75 in 1995. New members can choose a free gift of a *Guyver* VHS tape or a 'Supermodel Kelly' mouse mat.

Special Reserve covered more-general software titles, and for an annual fee of around £6, members could buy discounted games as well as receive the magazine *NRG*. This was essentially a glorified catalogue, and a far cry from the more anarchic *Confidential* magazine, but it nevertheless featured reviews of the latest releases. Adverts for Special Reserve quickly became ubiquitous across videogame magazines of the time, and by mid-1990 it had around 25,000 members, with around 5,500 of those also being members of Official Secrets.

» Dave Clarke promoted the *Friday the 13th* game for Domark when he started Inter-Mediates – an experience that didn't sit well with his Christian faith.

But Official Secrets was struggling by this point, two years after its debut. An editorial from 'the boss upstairs' in issue 12 of *Confidential* addressed concerns that membership was too expensive by saying "in the early days the club was heavily subsidised and even now the profits are not high", before going on to detail a further rise in membership fees from £27.99 to £29.99. Not too long after that, Official Secrets closed.

Yet Special Reserve continued to thrive, and the company even went on to launch a chain of shops (see

» A double-page Special Reserve advert from issue two of Amiga Power in 1991.

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Over 50,000 people have joined Special Reserve - the club gives you more for your money with no obligation to buy.
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XS NRG costs £14.99 extra but saves you up to £120
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Special Reserve
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Phone 0279 600204 for availability and price.
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3.5" SONY DS/DD DISK+ LABEL .....59p each
All items shown are official UK versions. We do not sell grey imports.
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PHILIPS 8833 MK2 MONITOR
AMIGA A501 512K RAM UPGRADE
AMIGA A590 20 MEG HARD DRIVE
CUMANA EXTERNAL DISK DRIVE
ROCTEC SLIM DISK DRIVE
Back row left to right
Front row left to right
Other items not shown
CITIZEN SWIFT 9 COLOUR PRINTER
OLYMPUS 14" OPTIK LEAD GLASS
POWERWORKS SUITE 36.49
KIND WORDS 2

Image courtesy of Dave Carlos.

» Dave Carlos (with beard) in his Inter-Mediates PR days at the launch of CDS Software's *Brian Clough's Football Fortunes* at Wembley Stadium. The chap holding the cup with him is Giles Hunter, head of CDS.

» *Myth* from Magnetic Scrolls was an exclusive title for Official Secrets, only available to members of the adventure-game club.

» The launch party for CDS Software's *Tank Attack* at the National Army Museum, another PR gig for Dave Carlos in his Inter-Mediates days (he can be seen on the top row, second from right).

» Dave Carlos at the National Computer Games Championship

'Shopping Time'). Early on, the Essex-based firm had rented offices in Sawbridgeworth, just over the county border in Hertfordshire, and these gradually expanded as the company gained personnel. The firm also started selling its own custom-built 'Maxx' PCs. Joe Hull, who joined the company in 1994, remembers assembling these PCs in a room at the back of the Sawbridgeworth warehouse. "It was a dream job at the time," he says. "I used to go up to the shop in my lunch hour and play on all the consoles. In the canteen was an old Amiga, and we could always play *Sensible Soccer* on that, too."

As the Nineties wore on, however, mail-order ads began to be usurped by the rise of internet shopping, and Special Reserve accordingly moved online. Richard Hull wrote games reviews for the online incarnation in the early Noughties, although, as he notes "it was news and reviews in inverted commas. Because, you know, it wasn't objective reviews; obviously it was always with the view to selling stuff". Nevertheless, he has fond memories of working at the Sawbridgeworth offices, "Largely it was an absolute laugh, because there were about 14 under-25 year olds hanging out in an office writing about games, and all the plastic tat that was associated with it as well. There were always tiny remote control cars that we were bombing around the place."

Ali Gray was a writer at Special Reserve at around the same time, and he recalls that the tiny size of the company meant that staff were regularly asked to work in roles outside their main one. "For example, all creative staff who worked on the catalogue were routinely called upon to take customer orders over the phone during the busy periods," he says. "It also wasn't uncommon for us to have to put shifts in at the store downstairs, or to load trucks." The Special Reserve catalogue (which eventually dropped the *NRG* name) also remained defiantly lo-fi, he remembers, "We didn't make the shift to digital until about 2003. Because we lacked digital typesetting, you'd have to wait two weeks until you could see the finished mag, and even then you might have massive errors on pages, images missing, colour clashes, all sorts of catastrophes in miniature."

Ali recalls that during this period, Tony was attempting to expand the business by adding new websites with an eclectic range of offerings. "We sold games, PC equipment, DVDs, digital cameras, yo-yos, toys, BB Guns, all sorts of mad stuff," he says. "The last one I remember him adding to his empire was *UKgardensheds.com*." Ultimately though, Special Reserve couldn't compete with the rise of other online retail sites, and Inter-Mediates closed down operations in 2005. "We didn't really move with the times," says Ali. "We catered for people who wanted to order online, but I don't think we were ever really prepared for the entire business to go digital."

RGT

Retro Gamer Travels

LOST IN TRANSLATION

How the rest of the world experienced your favourite games

JPN

» [PlayStation] The original intro gives a hint of our protagonist's capability for psychic devastation.

GALERIANS

JPN → EUR
Japan → EUR

GALERIANS
Departing: 1999

FORMAT
PlayStation ■

DEVELOPER
Polygon Magic ■

YEAR
1999 ■

ORIGIN
Japan ■

LOCALISED FOR
Europe ■

REASONS
Drugs, violence ■

ECONOMY

■ **Back in the Nineties, if a game was decidedly unsuitable for children, it would usually attract the attention of the British Board Of Film Classification, which could issue legally enforceable age ratings and demand cuts.** *Galerians* didn't meet that fate, instead getting the much rarer ELSPA 18+ rating – an advisory rather than mandatory restriction that was also given to games like *Command & Conquer: Red Alert*. Despite this lower level of enforcement, *Galerians* still received some PAL-specific cuts.

The first notable change comes during the FMV intro, which cuts to the main menu screen about ten seconds earlier than in the NTSC versions. This is to spare us delicate Europeans from the scenes of blood-streaked hallways filled with corpses, presumably slain by our protagonist Rion, whose face ends the original FMV sequence.

The second major cut concerns one of Rion's signature traits. He manages his psychic powers with the use of 'Psychic Power Enhancement Chemicals' – the euphemism introduced in the American version to cover for the fact that Rion is basically constantly shooting up with drugs. If he gets low on these, or becomes too stressed, his powers go wild and start exploding the heads of any nearby baddies until he either regains control or dies. Unsurprisingly, the developers did state that they really liked the horror sci-fi movie *Scanners*. However, in the PAL version, enemies are just flung backwards by Rion's powers instead, before bleeding out less spectacularly on the floor.

While no official reason was ever given for these cuts, we'd speculate that it may have something to do with Germany. The country's strict laws concerning the depiction of violence against humans were often a problem for developers at that time – though interestingly, the German version only received a 16 rating, so if the cuts were for that reason they *really* worked.

EUR

» [PlayStation] We Europeans are apparently too squeamish for all that violence, so our version of the intro cuts after this scene.

JPN

» [PlayStation] When Rion goes into overdrive, heads go bang – or at least, that's how it was originally intended.

EUR

» [PlayStation] Over here on European shores, baddies bleed out in a rather orderly, dignified manner after being repelled.

GEX: ENTER THE GECKO

USA → UK
USA → UK

GEX: ENTER THE GECKO
Departing: 1998

FORMAT
Various

DEVELOPER
Crystal Dynamics

YEAR
1998

ORIGIN
USA

LOCALISED FOR
UK

REASONS
Cultural, Commercial

■ Shared cultural experiences can be a great launchpad for successful humour, but only if they're truly shared. Take the late Nineties phenomenon that was *Austin Powers* – since the *James Bond* films were popular worldwide, international audiences were in on the parody. Unfortunately for *Gex*, there was no easy way to get him away from his TV addict gimmick. That meant Dana Gould returned to voice the character, with plenty of zany voices and references to popular American TV shows. At some point it was decided that this wouldn't work for the UK audience, which would be unfamiliar with many of the references. Fortunately, Gex had been newly characterised as a debonair secret agent for his 3D debut, and the gecko's voice lines were recast and rewritten. So where Americans got to hear Dana Gould saying "dude, I'm trippin'" in a stereotypical 'stoner' voice, British audiences were treated to the silky-smooth voice of *Carry On* star Leslie Phillips, musing on what it's like "to see the world as Keith Richards does". While it's a long way from the original characterisation, it was arguably the right approach for the market, as many players have fond memories of Leslie Phillips' voice acting.

» [PlayStation] We're not sure why Gex feels like he's in Boy George's pants in the UK script, but whatever works.

» [PlayStation] We'd had enough of American drug stereotypes after about three minutes of playing the US version.

ECONOMY

CYBER BRAWL

JPN → ROW
Japan → Rest Of World

CYBER BRAWL
Departing: 1994

FORMAT
32X

DEVELOPER
Almanic Corporation

YEAR
1994

ORIGIN
Japan

LOCALISED FOR
Rest Of World

REASONS
Commercial

■ Of all the fighting games on the 32X, *Cyber Brawl* – or *Cosmic Carnage*, as it's known outside of Japan – is easily the third best after *Mortal Kombat II* and *Virtua Fighter*. Of course, there are only three 32X fighting games so that's not saying much, but thankfully it's more interesting to examine than to play.

Despite having been developed in Japan, the game first arrived as *Cosmic Carnage* in North America in November 1994. In January 1995, it was released in Japan under the name *Cyber Brawl* – a name that had previously been used to market the game in America. The Japanese version sported some interesting differences – as well as a rewritten intro script, seven of the eight characters had been renamed and three of them sported brand-new human designs. Naruto, the only character to retain his name, was no longer an unknowable shadow creature, big bug Cylic was instead known as Jake and fiery Zena-Lan became Ray.

It's possible to switch regions in the US and Japanese versions by holding B+X+Z and hitting Start during the intro – a curious feature, perhaps left in by a team dissatisfied with some of the regional changes.

» [32X] In Japan, Ray is just a strong human woman fighting the terrifying alien prisoners for a single escape pod.

» [32X] Everywhere else in the world, Zena-Lan's head is on fire, which we'd imagine her hairstylist charges an absolute fortune for.

ECONOMY

THE MAKING OF

ALFRED CHICKEN

CREATOR JASON MCGANN SPEAKS TO RETRO GAMER ABOUT THE HATCHING OF HIS CAREER IN GAMES, THE LEGACY (EGG-ACY?) OF TWILIGHT SOFTWARE AND, OF COURSE, THE EMERGENCE OF THE RED-FEATHERED, DIVE-BOMBING HERO (AND PROSPECTIVE MP FOR CHRISTCHURCH, DORSET) HIMSELF, ALFRED CHICKEN

WORDS BY STUART GIPP

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** MINDSCAPE
- **DEVELOPER:** TWILIGHT
- **RELEASED:** 1993
- **PLATFORM:** GAME BOY, VARIOUS
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

» Jason McGann relished his time making *Alfred Chicken*.

Jason McGann (born 1971) started out with BASIC, learning from magazines that he would need to pick up machine code in order to make anything more significant. "The first hurdle was getting a Z80 machine code manual. The second was understanding anything in it," he tells us.

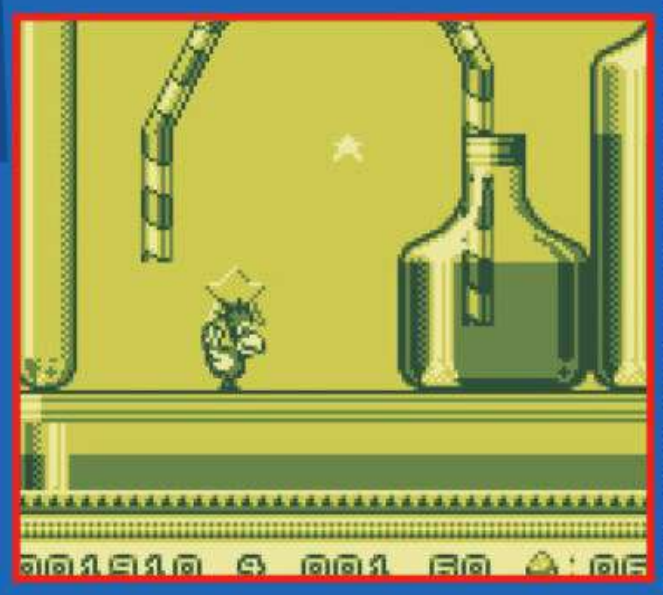
Between 1983 and 1986, Jason attempted to make a number of his own games. Early effort *Droid Wars 2* – an unofficial sequel to a *Your Sinclair* type-in game – squandered all the Spectrum's available memory on its title screen and a primitive but demanding attempt at synthesised speech. A platform game called *Time Tunnel* ("Or *Time Tube* or something," adds Jason), innovatively scrolled from right to left, but was so poor that contemporary magazines wouldn't even accept it as a type-in. Jason set off for college on a two-year national diploma in computer studies, where he spent the entire time programming a Spectrum. "I basically got the government to pay me to learn how to make games," he adds. Despite this state-funded development budget, a further effort named *Cryogenix* ("a *Cybernoid* rip-off") failed to get published.

After leaving college, he saw an advert in *Popular Computing Weekly* for Harrogate-based developer Enigma Variations, who were looking for programmers. "My grandparents drove me to Harrogate on a dry run to find their office, but it turned out to be a bloke's house." Managing director Richard Naylor's house, in fact, and Jason went in for an interview there and then. A combination of having a finished game (the aforementioned *Cryogenix*) and being extremely cheap got him hired and he spent a year programming budget games such as *The Real Stunt Experts* and *Postman Pat 2* for publisher Alternative Software, the latter of which saw the titular Pat delivering letters in Greendale while avoiding chickens; the first, but clearly not last instance of poultry-based gameplay in Jason's oeuvre.

In 1989, fellow programmer Mark Mason received an unjust sacking, leading to Enigma Variations employees walking out en masse and setting up a company called Twilight. "[Enigma] wasn't that bothered," laughs Jason, "they were probably relieved to see the back of us." Twilight's first work was a Spectrum conversion of Thalamus' C64 title *Delta Charge!*, followed by a couple of years working on Hanna-Barbera tie-ins such as *Atom Ant*, *Yogi Bear* and *Hong Kong Phooey: No. 1 Super Guy*.

Initially operating out of Mark's front room ("we had to get all the equipment out when the landlord came by,") Twilight soon got a visit from Ocean software's Colin Gordon, who wanted a version of puzzle game *Plotting* for the ill-fated Amstrad GX4000 system's launch. "It was a badly designed console that couldn't address multi-frame sprites, because it was just a little bit cheaper not to do it," laments Jason. *Plotting* flopped, but Ocean was impressed with the team's turnaround.

After making *Darkman* for Ocean, Twilight worked on Sega titles for Tiertex, producing ports of arcade titles *Bonanza Bros*



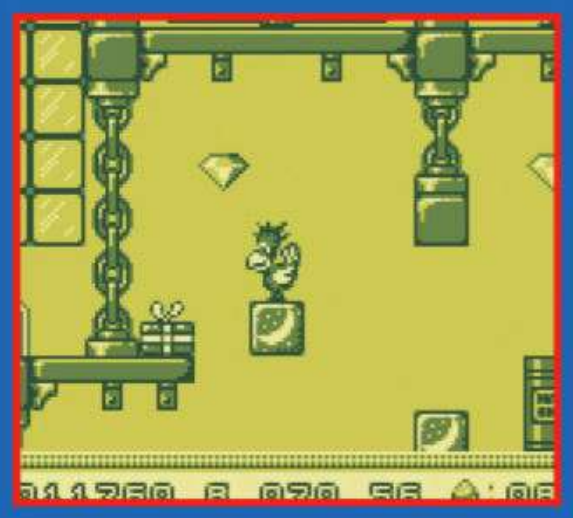
» [Game Boy] The graphics in *Alfred Chicken* are perfectly formed and still hold up well today.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

COOL WORLD
SYSTEM: AMIGA, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1992

PLOTTING
SYSTEM: ATARI ST, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1990

VIDEOKID (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: AMIGA, ATARI ST
YEAR: 1992



» [Game Boy] These lovely wrapped presents make Alfred temporarily invincible, letting him give enemies a (chicken) licking. Sorry.

and *Mega Twins*. "We got about £80,000 to develop *WWF Wrestlemania* for all formats," adds Jason. "We were naive and didn't ask for royalties, and the game stuck around high in the charts for about two years."

At the time, a lot of Spectrum coders jumped to the Game Boy, as it had a similar Z80 processor, pared down by Nintendo to remove architecture that wasn't necessary for game development. Twilight wasn't an official Nintendo developer, but picked up a 'custom' (read: dodgy) development kit, keen to create an original Game Boy game. Enter the chicken.

"Alfred and [his flower friend] Mr Pekles were designed to be game characters – people at work thought they were funny and appealing, and I wanted to make a game starring them." Jason's original concept was a vertically scrolling game based on *Rainbow Islands*, in which Alfred ascended the screen by riding balloons – but it didn't turn out particularly interesting. Shortly afterwards Twilight received a Super Famicom from Japan on import. "*Super Mario World* blew my mind. It was so far ahead of where we were. A lot of that leaked into the Alfred design – we just ripped that off, really." The *Super Mario World* similarities were certainly there with *Alfred Chicken*'s secret warp zones to later levels as well as a Jam Jar power-up that let Alfred fire bombs that were suspiciously similar in utility to *Super Mario Bros*' Fire Flower.

Alfred Chicken was the first game Twilight had a decent amount of time to develop, taking 18 months from inception to release. The game's polish came through in the demo that was shown to Ocean, who loved the game and signed on as publisher – on the proviso that they could change Alfred into Woodstock from *Peanuts*. "On a commercial level, I can see where they were coming from," notes Jason, "But Alfred was my baby and the team got behind me." John Cook, agent for Peter Molyneux in the early Bullfrog years, loved *Alfred Chicken* and took it to American publisher Mindscape, who were interested as mascot games were all the rage. Twilight was six months into development when Mindscape picked *Alfred* up. Jason did programming and map design, Peter Tattersall drew the graphics and Mark Barker produced the map editor. "I worked 18-hour days for over a year," remembers Jason, "I really threw myself into it. Mindscape left us to our own devices. They didn't stick an oar in, it was a fantastic time as a developer."

> "MINDSCAPE LEFT US TO OUR OWN DEVICES. THEY DIDN'T STICK AN OAR IN, IT WAS A FANTASTIC TIME AS A DEVELOPER"
> JASON MCGANN

» [Amiga] You'll believe a chicken can swim, as Alfred's adventure takes him on underwater escapades. Thankfully he packed his scuba gear.

» [Game Boy] It wouldn't be a platformer with false walls. What will Alfred find behind this hidden door?

» Jason taking a break from working on the Game Boy version of *Alfred Chicken*.

» [Game Boy] Snails are well-known to be the arch-nemeses of chickens, so it stands to reason they'd show up as enemies.

PLUCKING PARLIAMENT

HOW ALFRED WENT AFTER YOUR PRECIOUS VOTES

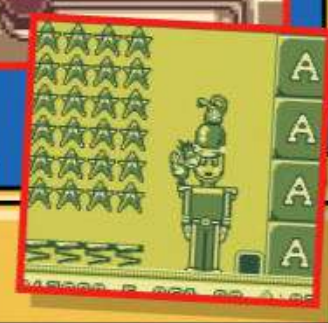
It's certainly a unique idea. Karl Fitzhugh – product manager of the Amiga version of *Alfred Chicken* – donned a full body suit and ran for parliament in the 1993 Christchurch, Dorset, by-election. "We found out that you could come up with a party, pay about 500 quid, turn up on the night and get national telly coverage," recalls Jason. "The cloth suit was made for trade shows and the like, but the head part was built around a crash helmet. We had to take the chicken through a metal detector and didn't want to take the helmet off, so we ended up discussing with security for absolutely ages about how we could enter the building without removing the suit. We could have got in with a load of bombs strapped to it."

Alfred's singular platform that games would become mandatory was at least marginally popular with constituents (and the attending Monster Raving Loony Party founder Screaming Lord Sutch took a shine to him, apparently), and he placed second-to-last with 18 votes. "An actual legitimate political party got fewer votes than a giant chicken," laughs Jason. "The *Yorkshire Post* newspaper phoned me up for an interview about the stunt. The journalist was really pissed off that we'd exploited the electoral system and they bloody hated me. I ended up getting a real grilling." Jason also recalls a telephone call from his mum, "Your chicken is on the front of the newspapers in the shop."

Twilight's dedication and passion is very apparent in the finished product, as *Alfred Chicken* is an expansive yet tightly designed experience which mixes exploration, light puzzling and all-out action to strong effect. The proposed balloons made it in, too, acting as checkpoints. Alfred and Mr Pekles have an undeniable charm and set-pieces such as the rapid escape from a rising chainsaw remain tense and exciting to this day. Unlike many Game Boy titles, it holds up rather well on the original hardware given the minimalist (and terrific) 16x24 pixel spritework's perfect compatibility with the system's blur-tastic screen. Many Game Boy games got overambitious with their visuals, but not this one; it's as easy to pick up and play as any cartridge you could name.

Despite its professed *Mario* ripping-off, *Alfred Chicken* had an identity of its own and the final game's Pythonesque sense of humour appealed to Mindscape, who wanted Amiga, NES and SNES versions produced post-haste. The superb Amiga conversion was handled by Andy Swann, who took the Game Boy original and converted it line for line, with graphics twice the pixel density. The NES port was handled by Jim Smart, but Mindscape didn't want to spend a lot of money on the cartridge as Nintendo's 8-bit console was at the end of its impressive life span by late 1993 – *Alfred Chicken* (NES) ended up on a cartridge half the size of the Game Boy title, but was still an impressive effort considering the total lack of additional chips in the cart; far from the norm at the time.

» [Game Boy Color] A devastating divebomb is Alfred's primary attack, bashing enemies into pieces with his beak.



» [Game Boy Color] This clockwork mouse is sleeping for now, but waking it turns it into a dangerous and erratic foe.

» [Amiga] This useful warp zone is deviously hidden on the first level. But why would you want to skip stages in a game this fun!?

» [Amiga] Being chased up the level by this chainsaw is one of *Alfred Chicken*'s most memorable set pieces.

As for ***Super Alfred Chicken*, Mindscape's owners Software Toolworks got involved and took Alfred to focus groups, testing response to a 'cooler' Alfred with shades on and a leather jacket.** "At one point there was a Fonz chicken, classic crappy stuff," recalls Jason. "It was just a waste of time, the focus groups eventually came back and they preferred Alfred as he was. So we had to claw back time [because] we didn't start the game until we decided what the main character was going to be." This led to a development time of only two months, resulting in burnout. Twilight was summoned to Brighton to work with the Mindscape crew who were finishing up SNES title *Pierre Le Chef Is Out To Lunch*, but the teams didn't gel brilliantly. "It wasn't the worst game, but it wasn't the best game," notes Jason. "If I could go back, I'd insist we had 12 months to make it and to work with the original team." Despite these tribulations, *Super Alfred Chicken* turned out perfectly enjoyable, with a whole host of brand-new levels replete with the expected hazards and hidden secrets.

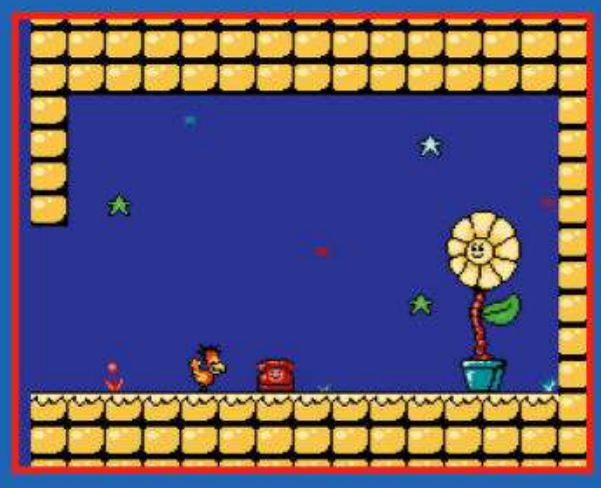
Thanks in no small part to a widely-viewed Game Grumps video in which the SNES version is unfairly

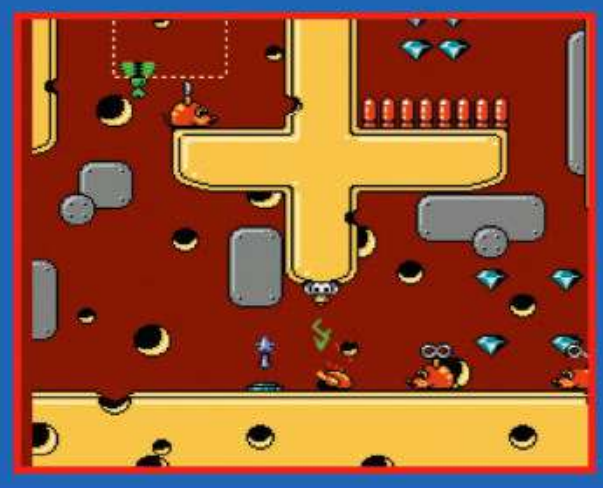
PLAYSTATION MAKEOVER

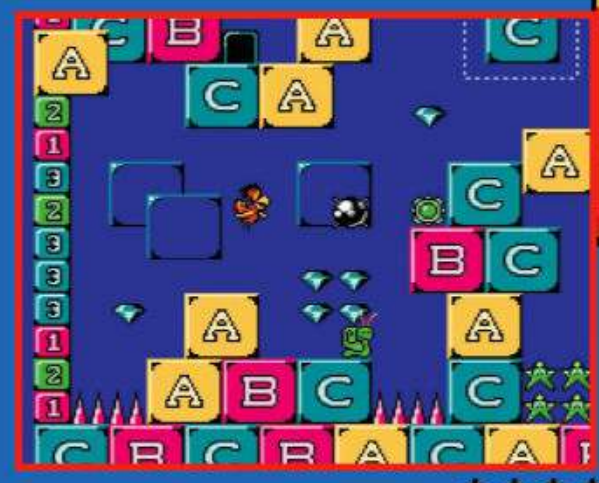
HOW ALFRED RECEIVED A 32-BIT UPDATE FOR SONY'S CONSOLE

"After the Game Boy Color remake came out, John Cook was no longer our agent," recalls Jason. "We had a new agent, Emma Killilea, who was working with Sony at the time. Sony wanted some games for the PlayStation at the end of its lifetime, a bunch of kid-targeted games as they figured the console would be passed to younger brothers and sisters." Emma liked *Alfred Chicken* and pitched it to Sony, who gave it the go-ahead on the instruction that it was explicitly to be aimed at 8-12 year-old gamers. While it was based on the Game Boy game, the level designs were adapted to make them easier as Sony thought the original was too hard and wanted young children to be able to finish the game. "If I could go back, I would say the major problem with it was it was sometimes hard to distinguish what you could walk on and what you couldn't," adds Jason.

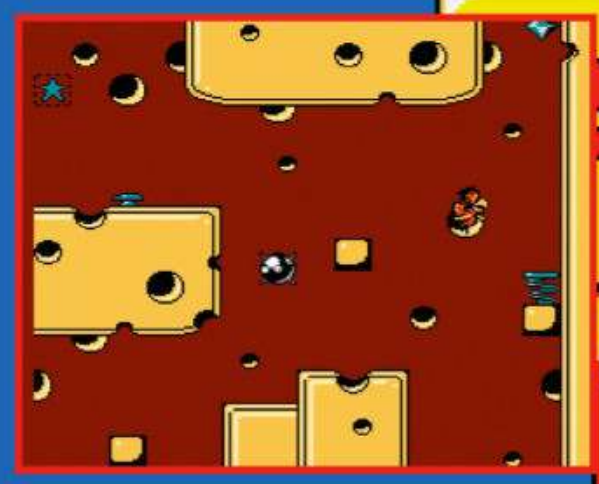
The graphics in this version were totally different; Möbius Entertainment's art director Ian Bowden had more of a fine art influence and decided to create something much more trippy and way-out, with plenty of background animation and a pleasant storybook presentation. While there were lots of limitations and somewhat crude graphical capabilities on PlayStation, *Alfred Chicken* holds up quite well due to how heavily stylised the visuals are. The aesthetics are enhanced by a strong soundtrack from Jim Croft, who presented a few tracks of his "rock-jazz stuff" to Jason who loved it and simply told him to "do what he liked". The team didn't hear the music until it was done and it fit the finished product really well. "We were told recently that it was [resemblant of] porno music, however I especially liked the end tune with the Meka Chicken battle."







» [NES] With a more zoomed-out view, the NES version is easier, but the sprites are a little weedy by comparison.



» [NES] Alfred can jump a lot higher than the average chicken. Surprisingly athletic, considering that he clearly eats a lot of cheese.

» [SNES] Alfred clambers all over some colourful balls. Stop laughing at the back, this is serious time.

» [SNES] A sustained divebomb eventually, brilliantly, transforms Alfred into a devastating missile.

> **IF I COULD GO BACK, I'D INSIST WE HAD 12 MONTHS TO MAKE IT AND TO WORK WITH THE ORIGINAL TEAM**
> JASON MCGANN

and witlessly lambasted, *Alfred Chicken* is a game with a rather unjust negative reputation in the modern day, but it did well with critics in Europe at the time – *Total!* magazine even ran a multi-issue playing guide for the Game Boy original. It didn't make a lot of money but broke even with royalties. "John Cook was a great agent," adds Jason, "And did me a real favour – he licensed Alfred to Mindscape and protected the IP to make sure Twilight kept the rights to the character, which was unheard of at the time." When Jason and artist Peter left to form Hookstone in 1994, the other guys at Twilight were gracious enough to give them the licence.

Puzzlers *Zoop* and *Sentinel Returns* (a belated PlayStation sequel to Geoff Crammond's BBC Micro classic, *The Sentinel*) followed from Hookstone, but there was no further sign of Alfred until the formation of Möbius Entertainment and the release of 2000 remake *Alfred's Adventure* for Game Boy Color. The tight, responsive controls and strong level design of the original were all retained, with the newly colourful graphics and some nice little quality of life improvements, such as a password save feature and the ability to revisit completed levels to search for those secrets you missed. A suitably enhanced PlayStation remake of *Alfred Chicken* (which you can read about on the opposite page) followed suit towards the end of the system's lifespan, releasing in 2002.

After producing some more Game Boy Color and Advance titles (such as the extremely impressive handheld version of *Max Payne*), Möbius Entertainment was bought out in 2004 and became Rockstar Leeds, making the acclaimed PSP and DS *Grand Theft Auto* titles (*Vice City Stories* and *Chinatown Wars*) as well as the well-received *Rockstar Table Tennis* and *The Warriors*, amongst others. Jason left the company in 2007, having realised that he'd been working in games for 19 straight years without a break. So he took a sabbatical and, in his own words, "took a few years off, had some kids and had a bit of a life."

As for the future of Alfred? Jason has a little something up his sleeve, "I was going to make a new one in 2010. I had a design document; it was a weird conspiracy tale about Mr Pekles figuring out that Meka Chickens were taking over the media. Paid work gets in the way. Maybe one day I'll bring him back as a low budget indie title, maybe spend a year on it. If I went for it on the humour and craziness it could be an interesting little project."

Panzer Dragoon Orta

LIKE A FINE WINE IT GETS BETTER WITH AGE

RETROREVIVAL

» XBOX » 2002 » SMILEBIT

The best thing about recently receiving an Xbox Series X from Microsoft was the ability to revisit the original console's back catalogue. Granted, there are only around 40 games currently available, but there are some absolute crackers on there, including this gorgeous on-rails shooter from Smilebit.

Panzer Dragoon Orta has always been a spectacular looking game on the original Xbox, but it's now been significantly enhanced on Microsoft's new machine, thanks to a 4K resolution and the inclusion of HDR, which manages to make the game look even more outrageous than it did in 2002.

Like many I was initially disappointed when I read about *Orta*, because Smilebit had decided to return to the on-rails formula that had served the series so well for its first two instalments. That disappointment instantly dissipated when I got my hands on a copy of the game and saw just how glorious it actually looked. Smilebit's decision to keep the game on-rails not only allowed it to create insane set-pieces, but also ensured the game could look as good as possible, and for me, it really highlights the power of Microsoft's first console.

The opening stage takes place in a beleaguered town, which is pummelled by driving rain and rocked by constant explosions, which clearly isn't fun for the people living there, but looks absolutely incredible as your shapeshifting dragon races to freedom. The eye candy continues with later stages featuring verdant jungles, desolate deserts, icy glaciers and subterranean hideouts, which are all bristling with danger and present a stiff challenge with crushingly-hard bosses.

My favourite stage however is stage four, when Orta and her faithful dragon team up with a group of friendly wormriders and cut their way through the Empire's gigantic fleet. It's a truly action-packed stage that features gargantuan flying airships and tremendously aggressive enemies that attack from all directions and requires you to use all three of your dragon's forms to have the best chance of survival. Needless to say it manages to look even more impressive when played on Microsoft's new console and if anything, it simply highlights the original strength of Smilebit's mesmerising art design.

SO YOU WANT TO COLLECT...

NINTENDO 64 GAMES

Even though many of its best games have had physical reissues and remasters, there are still plenty of great N64 games that remain exclusive to the system. Here are 20 you may want to consider if you plan on building or expanding your collection

Words by Darran Jones

NINJA STAR

FIGHTER'S DESTINY

DEVELOPER: OPUS CORP
RELEASE: 1998

EXPECT TO PAY £32+ JAPAN

■ The N64 was starved for genuinely excellent one-on-one fighters, but this lovely offering from Opus Corp is one of the system's highlights. While many of its core fighters are very generic – one is called Ninja for goodness sake – its main gameplay mechanics are anything but.

Fighter's Destiny focuses on a novel points system to determine who wins matches and those points can be accrued in a number of ways, with more complex attacks – like using special moves or managing to get a full knock down – scoring more points. It's a great system that delivers an incredible amount of depth, more so when you realise most moves are pulled off with just the A and B buttons.

Luckily, *Fighter's Destiny* is still flying under the radar of many N64 owners, as prices are still very reasonable. Complete PAL versions typically top out at £25, while US copies range from £10 to £38 for sealed copies. If you want the Japanese one, it's a little pricier and is called *Fighting Cup*. Needless to say, carts are cheaper and sell for as little as £3.20.

» [N64] Pierre may look silly, but he's a serious fighter who is hard to deal with.

CHOOSE YOUR DESTINY

Meet the core fighters from Opus Corp's entertaining brawler

RYUJI
This Ryu wannabe is a master of karate and the game's cover star. He's easy to get to grips with, which makes him the perfect starter character for beginners. He hails from Japan.

ABDUL
This large Mongolian isn't the most nimble of fellas and his love of slow lumbering attacks (complete with lengthy animations) means he's geared towards experts.

TOMAHAWK
This big brash American is incredibly powerful and staggers opponents easily. That immense power comes at a cost though… he's sluggish and easy to counter.

MEILING
This Chinese fighter lacks the ability to throw opponents or grapple them. Fortunately, she's extremely nimble, which can give her an edge over certain opponents.

NINJA
Only skilled players should consider jumping in with Ninja as this Japanese fighter is very hard to use effectively. He's certainly worth mastering, though.

LEON
The character select screen claims this Spaniard to be a good all-rounder and it's hard to argue with that assessment. Use his powerful kicks to your advantage.

PIERRE
Silly Pierre likes to use moves that often leave him with his back exposed. What a clown! As a result the French brawler is another fighter who is best left for the experts to play as.

VALERIE
This German contestant is the only core aerial fighter and is most effective there. She's tricky to use, though so make sure you show her the respect she deserves.

BOB
Brazilian Bob is another powerful fighter who is more than happy to take minor blows if he can land a few devastating attacks in return. Good players will get the most out of him.

THRILLS AND SPILLS

EXCITEBIKE 64

EXPECT TO PAY £30+ USA

EXPECT TO PAY £10+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: LEFT FIELD PRODUCTIONS
RELEASE: 2000

■ If you look hard enough you'll find plenty of great N64 exclusives at prices that won't break the bank. This 3D update of *Excitebike* is one such example and while it's quite difficult, mastering it not only brings its own rewards, but unlocks some excellent extras, including the original NES classic, a 3D update of it, as well as a bonkers soccer game. There's even a track editor to ensure you'll still have plenty to do once you're done with the core game (which will take a while).

As we've already mentioned, prices are still extremely reasonable. Complete PAL copies range from £14 to £50 depending on condition. US copies are on the rise and start from £30. The Japanese version starts at £10, but does have a fair amount of Japanese to navigate. Carts rarely top £15.

EXPECT TO PAY £14+ EUROPE

» [N64] Left Field's game is quite challenging even on the easy courses. Mastering cornering is a critical key to success.

» [N64] A large number of famous brands like No Fear and Alpinestars may explain why we've never had a remake.

THE WALLET BUSTER

CASTLEVANIA: LEGACY OF DARKNESS

EXPECT TO PAY £95+ USA

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1999

■ The most interesting discovery about the N64 *Castlevania* games is they're not bad at all. While the first is recommended, it's *Legacy Of Darkness* that you should really seek out, as it features a whole load of extras, including two additional characters, that weren't finished in time for the original game's release.

Yes the camera angles are naff, and yes the controls are clunky, but it's a wonderfully atmospheric game with some cool boss battles and excellent music. Unfortunately, the game's reputation has meant it has significantly jumped in price recently. PAL copies are now selling between £90 and £199 complete. The superior US version starts similarly, but tops out at £260. The Japanese edition (search for *Akumajou Dracula*) is a better compromise at £60.

» [N64] This gigantic fellow will be instantly familiar to anyone who played the first N64 *Castlevania* game.

EXPECT TO PAY £90+ EUROPE

EXPECT TO PAY £60+ JAPAN

» [N64] *Legacy* introduces a werewolf called Cornell, as well as the noble knight, Henry Oldrey.

MAGICAL MAYHEM

MYSTICAL NINJA STARRING GOEMON

EXPECT TO PAY £190+ USA

EXPECT TO PAY £45+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1997

■ Konami's gloriously silly platformer is one of those releases which make us wish we could be happier with unoptimised PAL games, as there's a big gulf in the prices.

If you don't mind borders or its slower speed you'll still be entertained by Konami's game as it really is outrageously bonkers with all the humour of the earlier games, and some surprisingly engaging mechanics. While much has been made of the game's camera angles, they are manageable and certainly worth persevering with, as Konami has crammed a hell of a lot of ambition in the 11 odd hours it will take to complete.

Carts for the PAL version start at £7 and the game itself rarely sells complete for more than £50. While US carts start at £20, we've not seen a complete copy sell recently for less than £190. The Japanese version can be had for around 45 notes, but does have the language barrier to clear.

EXPECT TO PAY £21+ EUROPE

» [N64] Goemon's first N64 outing has towns, an overworld and *Zelda*-styled dungeons to explore.

» [N64] *Mystical Ninja*'s Impact Battles are bonkers and greatly benefit from being in 3D.

MEET GOEMON'S PALS

As well as Goemon, *Mystical Ninja* lets you switch between three other heroes

EBISUMARU

In addition to having the funniest gait in videogame history, Goemon's buddy wields a deadly hammer and can pick up a camera to solidify ghosts and find hidden objects. He's also handily able to shrink down in size in order to enter certain areas, but is unable to fight in this smaller form.

YAE

You don't get access to this green-hair ninja until later in the game, but she's certainly worth seeking out. Her katana and bazooka make her a deadly opponent, while her handy flute is great for warping to different villages. Best of all, her ability to transform into a mermaid opens up brand-new areas to explore.

SASUKE

This is another character you can't transform into immediately. He'll come in handy in later parts of the game as his super jump makes it a lot easier to tackle some of the later platforming sections. While his kunai is a decent weapon, his bombs are extremely useful as they open up sealed doors, which can hide useful items.

COLLECTING TIPS!

Upgrade your memory
■ Make sure you stock up on spare Controller Paks as titles like *ISS '98* use an entire card. You'll want to be able to save the games you buy.

Go Japanese
■ A number of games featured here have cheap Japanese alternatives and sometimes the language barrier isn't too difficult. *Pilotwings 64* for example.

Be Import savvy
■ There's a big charge hitting UK collectors buying from the US shortly. Keep this in mind when purchasing anything from the States to avoid hidden charges.

Optimise efficiently
■ The N64 does suffer from some poorly optimised version of its biggest hitters (*F-Zero X* for example) so keep that in mind if performance matters to you.

THEMED FAMILY FUN

MARIO PARTY 2

EXPECT TO PAY £52+ EUROPE

DEVELOPER: HUDSON SOFT
RELEASE: 1999

EXPECT TO PAY £45+ USA

■ A good selection of themed boards and some genuinely great minigames make this our favourite of the three available N64 *Mario Party* games. There are neat new touches like characters dressing up in themed costumes and the 21 minigames that return from the first game have been suitably jazzed up.

Sadly, *Mario Party 2* is now rising in price. PAL carts start at £33, but complete copies can reach £109. The Japanese version is far cheaper at £25 for a complete copy, but working out the minigames can be tough going. The US version is all over the place. While we've seen it sell complete for £45, £85 is more usual and it has hit highs of £185!

EXPECT TO PAY £25+ JAPAN

» [N64] We love the pirate costumes worn here. They look very cute and add a bit of fun to proceedings.

» [N64] Minigames come in a variety of forms, from multiplayer to those aimed at a single player.

THE ALTERNATIVES

Discover the other two Mario Party games for the N64

The original *Mario Party* came out in 1998 and saw Mario and his friends navigating themed board games and taking part in 50 minigames (some of which could be notoriously rough on the palms). *Mario Party 3* was released in 2000 and in addition to adding Daisy and Waluigi, also upped the minigames to 71. While *Mario Party* rarely passes the £60 mark, the third game is more costly and typically reaches £200.

THE PRICE HIKER

PAPER MARIO

EXPECT TO PAY £159+ EUROPE

DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS
RELEASE: 2000

EXPECT TO PAY £150+ USA

EXPECT TO PAY £25+ JAPAN

» [N64] Know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em. Because they're made of paper, see?

■ We're not sure whether it's the recent release of *Paper Mario: The Origami King*, or the pandemic in general, but this game has shot up in price recently. Back in February, complete US copies were rarely selling beyond £90. Now it's constantly reaching £150-£190, which is quite the price jump. The Japanese version has largely stayed the same and sells for around £25, but we wouldn't recommend it due to the sheer amount of text in it. So that leaves the PAL version, which quite frankly sells for bonkers money. A typical complete copy ranges from £159 to £510. If you want to go one further and seek out a 'graded' version, that will set you back as much as £1,118, which quite frankly, is ridiculous.

Intelligent Systems' RPG is a fantastic game, though, so if those prices are too much consider a cartridge or grabbing it from the Wii U store while you still can. Your wallet will thank you.

PURE FANTASY FOOTBALL

INTERNATIONAL SUPERSTAR SOCCER '98

EXPECT TO PAY £50+ USA

EXPECT TO PAY £10+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1998

■ Konami's magnificent football game is a good title to feature as it highlights the price gulf that can appear between regions. Complete copies of the PAL version can sell from £3 (the same as a cart), although £10 is more typical, and it rarely tops £25. The US version is a different story as football wasn't anywhere near as popular there. As a result carts start at £20 and complete copies go from £50-£80 (although a 'graded' one recently sold for an eye-watering £449). The Japanese version sells complete between £10 and £15, but it's known as *Jikkyo World Soccer: World Cup France '98*, so keep that in mind when searching for it. Whatever version you end up going for (even the PAL version is surprisingly fast to play) you'll end up with the best footy game for the system. Don't bother with the later *ISS 2000* as it's pricier and not in the same league (ho ho).

EXPECT TO PAY £3+ EUROPE

» [N64] If we have one criticism about Konami's footy game, it's that the keepers are tough to beat.

MORE GAMES TO CONSIDER

WORLD DRIVER CHAMPIONSHIP
DEVELOPER: BOSS GAME STUDIOS
RELEASED: 1999
EXPECT TO PAY
£16+ (EUROPE) **£33+** (USA)

WWF NO MERCY
DEVELOPER: AKI CORPORATION
RELEASED: 2000
EXPECT TO PAY
£16+ (EUROPE) **£66+** (USA)

MARIO GOLF
DEVELOPER: CAMELOT SOFTWARE
RELEASED: 1999
EXPECT TO PAY
£23+ (EUROPE) **£49+** (USA) **£11+** (JAPAN)

GOLDENEYE 007
DEVELOPER: RARE
RELEASED: 1997
EXPECT TO PAY
£20+ (EUROPE) **£38+** (USA)

BODY HARVEST
DEVELOPER: DMA DESIGN
RELEASED: 1998
EXPECT TO PAY
£21+ (EUROPE) **£30+** (USA)

NO HERBIE HERE

BEETLE ADVENTURE RACING

EXPECT TO PAY £26+ USA

EXPECT TO PAY £22+ EUROPE

EXPECT TO PAY £37+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: PARADIGM ENTERTAINMENT, EA CANADA
RELEASE: 1999

■ The N64 has no shortage of arcade racers available to play, but few are as entertaining as *Beetle Adventure Racing*. Like many racers of the era, it's low on tracks, but it beats its peers with lots of short cuts, meaning there's a lot of replay value as you tear around looking for power-ups (which are hidden away inside crates) and trying to best your top times.

While PAL carts start at £8, boxed copies range between £22 and £30. Interestingly, a rarer Australian PAL variant called *HSV Adventure Racing*, which replaces the Beetles with HSV Clubsports cars, exists and ranges from £30 for a loose cart to £160 to £370 for a complete copy (depending on condition). Complete Japanese copies hit the £50 mark while the US version ranges from £17 (cart) to £35 (complete).

» [N64] The AI can get quite aggressive, so be prepared for a lot of tight matches on the later difficulty levels.

POKÉ-FUN

POKÉMON PUZZLE LEAGUE

EXPECT TO PAY £55+ EUROPE

EXPECT TO PAY £51+ USA

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO SOFTWARE TECHNOLOGY
RELEASE: 2000

■ Traditional *Pokémon* games tend to be quite pricey and unfortunately spin-offs are no different. Having said that, this is one of the better exclusive puzzle games on Nintendo's console and is worth adding to your collection if you can afford it. Mechanically it plays the same as the popular *Panel De Pon* series, but has a distinct *Pokémon* theme, which we rather like. It's big on variety too, with a number of modes that range from standard vs matches to a brand-new 3D mode which takes place on an 18-block wide cylinder instead.

PAL puzzle fans can pick up carts from £16, with complete copies ranging from £55 to £72. Bizarrely, *Puzzle League* wasn't released in Japan, so that leaves the US offering if you want a fully optimised version. Carts are similarly priced, but complete copies can range from £51 to £95.

» [N64] You've gotta match 'em all if you want to be the very best at *Pokémon Puzzle League*.

CHEAP AND CHEERFUL

PILOTWINGS 64

EXPECT TO PAY £32+ USA

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD, PARADIGM SIMULATION
RELEASE: 1996

EXPECT TO PAY £12+ JAPAN

■ This N64 launch game not only remains a truly relaxing experience, but also highlights how successfully certain games made the jump to 3D. Structurally it's incredibly similar to the SNES original, but introduces six different characters and replaces the bi-plane with new gyrocopter missions. Many of the challenges will take an age to master on the higher difficulty settings, and there's a variety of bonus stages that include skydiving events and the ability to fly around the island at your leisure as a birdman.

Being a launch title, *Pilotwings 64* is pretty common and complete PAL copies start at £9 and rarely pass £25. Complete Japanese copies should never cost more than £15, but US versions are a little pricier. If you can find a complete copy for under £49 pat yourself on the back.

EXPECT TO PAY £9+ EUROPE

GET THE SET

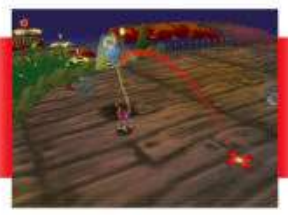
There's only three games in the series, so why not get them all?

PILOTWINGS

Like its N64 sequel, the original *Pilotwings* was a launch game. It also holds up incredibly well today and is very reasonably priced, too. Complete English versions should rarely ever cost more than £30, while the Japanese edition seldom sells above £20.

PILOTWINGS RESORT

The third game in the series is another launch title, this time for the 3DS. While it shares similarities with its peers, it also feature elements from *Wii Sports Resort*. Complete European copies sell between £2.50 and £12.75, but be aware that the system is region locked.



ROCKET: ROBOT ON WHEELS

DEVELOPER: SUCKER PUNCH
RELEASED: 1999
EXPECT TO PAY
£99+ (EUROPE) **£244+** (USA)

SUPER SMASH BROS

DEVELOPER: HAL LABORATORY
RELEASED: 1999
EXPECT TO PAY
£43+ (EUROPE) **£79+** (USA) **£20** (JAPAN)

SIN & PUNISHMENT

DEVELOPER: TREASURE
RELEASED: 2000
EXPECT TO PAY
£43+ (JAPAN)

POKÉMON SNAP

DEVELOPER: HAL LABORATORY
RELEASED: 1999
EXPECT TO PAY
£30+ (EUROPE) **£42+** (USA) **£8+**

EXTREME-G

DEVELOPER: PROBE ENTERTAINMENT
RELEASED: 1997
EXPECT TO PAY
£13+ (EUROPE) **£14+** (USA) **£13+** (JAPAN)

PC Engine SuperGrafx

» **MANUFACTURER:** NEC » **YEAR:** 1989 » **COST:** ¥39,800 (launch), £350+ (today, boxed), £200+ (today, unboxed)

The mid-generation hardware refresh is always a tricky task, and NEC's attempt to pep up the PC Engine is one of the more miserable failed examples of it. While the PC Engine was doing pretty well in the Japanese market in 1989, the challenge from Nintendo and Sega was real. To combat these threats, NEC upgraded the PC Engine with a second graphics chip and additional RAM, allowing the console to display advanced effects including a secondary scrolling background plane. The SuperGrafx ultimately failed on two fronts. Unlike with the CD-ROM format introduced in 1988, there was no way for existing PC Engine owners to upgrade their consoles to play SuperGrafx software, meaning that they'd have to buy brand new consoles for a handful of games. Meanwhile, new PC Engine buyers could get the CoreGrafx for ¥15,000 less, and miss out on very little by doing so.

The hardware itself is an abject failure. The small size and clean design of the original PC Engine are gone, replaced with an ostentatious industrial look and an odd, angled HuCard slot at the rear of the console. The need to use an adaptor to connect a CD-ROM unit headlines this festival of bad decisions. *

SYSTEM SUPPLIED BY **EVAN AMOS**

ESSENTIAL GAME
Ghouls 'N Ghosts

While it's fair to acknowledge that the Mega Drive version of Capcom's arcade hit was a very good conversion, those in the know recognise that it wasn't the best contemporary conversion. NEC Avenue did a fantastic job with the SuperGrafx version of *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, even fitting in a fake arcade self-check test on boot. Given the reputation this series has, you'd expect a tough challenge and you'll find it – there are no major modifications to the arcade design, and you're actually given limited credits. If you're not keen on spending major cash, check it out on the PC Engine Mini.

PC Engine SuperGrafx fact

■ The art on SuperGrafx HuCards is printed with the connector facing downwards, as opposed to regular HuCards where the connector faces upwards, to match the console's slot orientation.

PROCESSORS: HUDSON SOFT HUC6280A 6502-BASED 8-BIT CPU (3.58 MHZ OR 7.16 MHZ)

RAM: 32KB MAIN MEMORY, 128KB VIDEO MEMORY

GRAPHICS: HUDSON SOFT HUC6270A VDP, UP TO 512X242 DISPLAY (256X239 TYPICAL), 482 COLOURS FROM A PALETTE OF 512, 128 SPRITES ON SCREEN

AUDIO: SIX PSG CHANNELS

MEDIA: HUCARD (UP TO 20 MEGABIT), OPTIONAL CD-ROM WITH ADD-ON

"THEN ALONG COMES THE WACHOWSKIS AND THEY WANT TO SHOOT AN HOUR OF MATRIX QUALITY MOVIE FOOTAGE FOR OUR GAME – AND WRITE THE ENTIRE STORY"
DAVID PERRY

TWO MOVIES. ONE ANIMATED ANTHOLOGY. AND THE MOST EXPENSIVE LICENSED VIDEOGAME EVER MADE. SEVENTEEN YEARS AFTER ITS ORIGINAL RELEASE, WE EXPLORE HOW ENTER THE MATRIX TRIED TO DEFY TRADITIONAL VIDEOGAME STORYTELLING BY SLOTTING INTO A WIDER TRANSMEDIA EXPERIENCE

WORDS BY AARON POTTER

THE MAKING OF

ENTER THE MATRIX

» Shiny Entertainment founder and former game director David Perry.

» Art director at Shiny Entertainment Robert Nesler.

Games based on a licence have been around almost as long as the medium itself, with most gaining a reputation for being cheap tie-ins or ill-produced cash grabs that needed much longer in the development oven. It's an unfortunate fact that, in most instances, the creative teams tasked with making a fun, interactive version of a beloved Hollywood IP weren't given the time necessary to succeed – to the extent that the *ET* game from 1982 for the Atari 2600 was famously rushed out by a single person and helped cause the US industry crash. After every crash, however, comes a full system reboot. And it was during the world's reboot at the turn of the millennium, around the time a particular gun-fu sci-fi movie released in cinemas, when Atari was determined to not make the same mistake again.

"I was contacted by [film producer] Joel Silver's office," says Shiny Entertainment founder and former game director David Perry. "They had this movie called *The Matrix*, starring Keanu Reeves. I was a fan of the directors, but we were slammed working on a really cutting-edge 3D game called *Sacrifice*, so I very embarrassingly passed on the project." David chalks this up as being high on his "list of terrible career decisions", though it wouldn't be long before he and his team would be given a second chance. They could even use this pioneering tech to translate the Wachowskis' sprawling universe more accurately into a videogame.

Most famous for creating the *Earthworm Jim* series of run-and-gun platformers back in the early Nineties, Shiny Entertainment might seem like an odd choice to develop *Enter The Matrix*. After all, this was an IP that placed some of life's biggest questions front and centre of a blockbuster movie, asking mainstream audiences to ponder such ideas

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** ATARI
- **DEVELOPER:** SHINY ENTERTAINMENT, INC
- **RELEASED:** 2003
- **PLATFORM:** GAMECUBE, XBOX, PLAYSTATION 2, PC,
- **GENRE:** ACTION

» [GameCube] An early form of motion capture allowed Shiny to accurately capture the performances of Anthony Wong and Jada-Pinkett Smith.

» [GameCube] Electing to play as Ghost or Niobe will see story sequences play out slightly differently.

» [GameCube] *Enter The Matrix* reveals how Niobe and Ghost caught up to save Morpheus from falling during *Reloaded*'s thrilling freeway chase.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

EARTHWORM JIM
SYSTEM: VARIOUS
YEAR: 1994

MDK (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC, PLAYSTATION
YEAR: 1997

THE MATRIX: PATH OF NEO
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2, PC, XBOX
YEAR: 2005

ASSEMBLING THE MATRIX

BLURRING THE LINE BETWEEN MOVIE AND GAME

Unlike most other interactive tie-ins that either recreated a movie or TV show's events and were developed after the fact, *Enter The Matrix* was the first example of a videogame being made in tandem with its IP. A mere part of a much wider transmedia experience that also included the two new *Matrix* movies being filmed back to back and an anthology series of animated shorts called *The Animatrix*, Shiny's game featured over an hour's worth of original footage written by the Wachowskis themselves and was shot using 35mm filmstock.

Niobe and Ghost's parallel adventures were seen as the perfect vice to reveal certain story aspects that couldn't be explained in either *Matrix* sequel due to time constraints. "While there are lots of little and big things here and there, the one that stands out to me is the one in which we reveal and explain the changed Oracle," remembers art director Robert Nesler. Actress Mary Alice had sadly died between filming *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, leading the character to be succeeded by Gloria Foster in the latter. This meant *Enter The Matrix* could explain the change through a sequence where the ominous Merovingian acquires the deletion codes for the Oracle's original shell.

Actors had their likenesses scanned, lines recorded and motions tracked to help create a more accurate representation of their character, lending *Enter The Matrix* a noticeable 'Hollywood' quality. Such attention to detail even stretched to the choreography of in-game manoeuvres, as well as those featured in cutscenes and live-action footage. This is because Jada Pinkett Smith (Niobe) and Anthony Wong's (Ghost) stunt doubles also had their movements captured, resulting in kung-fu fights overseen by the franchise's fight choreographer Yuen Woo-ping to end up in the game.

» Reference photo

» In game render

as 'is the world a simulation?', 'will technology lead to society's downfall?' and 'do humans exercise any free will?'. All *Earthworm Jim* ever asked of players was to make it to the end of the level without dying, but it was David's previous history working on tie-in games based on *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles*, Disney's *Aladdin* and such that helped get his foot back in the door.

It was specifically working on *The Terminator* (1992) on Sega Mega Drive that led to David's surprise about how much involvement his studio would have on the proposed *Matrix* multimedia project Warner Bros was investing in. "'Sorry, you can't be the Terminator, and you can't be Sarah Connor, actually you can only use one image of Arnold, and you have to play the guy, Kyle, that dies in the movie'," he reflects, explaining what restrictions around licensed games was like before. "Then along comes the Wachowskis and they want to shoot an hour of *Matrix* quality movie footage for our game – and write the entire story. It was the most exciting project we'd ever been offered."

Following rigorous meetings with both the Wachowskis and producer Joel Silver, the outline for what would become *Enter The Matrix* was agreed upon. It would serve primarily as a third-person action game with driving, shooting and hacking elements, running parallel to the story of *The Matrix Reloaded* so that familiar characters and events could crossover. Never before or arguably since has a tie-in videogame worked so intimately alongside the production of the property it's based on. The intention was to make a game purposely designed to imbue players with additional narrative context that average moviegoers would be lacking.

"The Wachowskis explained it to me that they wanted to have two experiences," David explains. "The people that saw the movies would enjoy watching them, but the people that played the games would have a different experience. In the movie Morpheus falls off a fuel truck, but he's saved by Niobe driving a car. As a gamer you had to get that car there, YOU saved Morpheus, but that movie viewer it just happy to see Morpheus survive. So to be clear, if these two people were watching the movie together – after one had played the game – they'd be having very different experiences."

Pulling this off effectively meant Shiny Entertainment had to stay true to *The Matrix*'s established art design and wholly unique iconography. 2003 was a time where dialled-in tablet devices didn't yet exist, maintaining online social profiles wasn't quite an everyday occurrence, and the sight of green code trickling down a black screen was still a novelty. To ensure that *Enter The Matrix* felt like a legitimate piece of this franchise's puzzle, art director Robert Nesler ate up all the movie assets he could get eyes on. "[Warner Bros] provided us with a tremendous

DISSECTING THE MATRIX

MELEE COMBAT

■ Fighting anyone who isn't an Agent involves performing a range of martial arts moves made up of roundhouse kicks, hand chops and bone-crushing slams. One button is dedicated to punches while the other unleashes leg moves, becoming more devastating to enemies whenever focus is engaged. Grab manoeuvres are also deadly.

THIRD-PERSON SHOOTING

■ Taking a bullet in *Enter The Matrix* does a lot of harm, so picking up a shotgun, sniper rifle or dual-wielded pistols pays dividends. This predates the age when cover shooting was king, however, leading most gun battles to play out in the open as you unload endless clips at enemies. Eventually they do go down but it does feel a bit strange when playing today.

CAR CHASES

■ Driving sequences play out differently depending on who you're playing as. Niobe, as the captain of the Logos ship, sees you navigate streets from either a first or third-person view. Ghost's version of events, meanwhile, temporarily transforms the game into an on-rails shooter, with you gunning down cars from the passenger's seat window.

COMPUTER HACKING

■ *Enter The Matrix* handled cheats in a way that made sense in-universe, letting players access unique weapons, special skills and even a hidden two-player fighting mode by way of a DOS-style hacking system accessed from the main menu. Low gravity, infinite health and more were just a few passwords away.

» [GameCube] Carrie-Anne Moss makes a brief appearance in *Enter The Matrix* as Trinity, training with Ghost in a minor boss battle.

» [GameCube] Opting to fight multiple upgraded agents at once will almost always result in death. Luckily, these instances are rare.

» [GameCube] Because *Enter The Matrix* released months before the final film, it marked the first appearance of Mary Alice's changed Oracle.

amount of useful and sensitive material," Robert remembers, "including development clips of the tanker explosion. We were actually given concepts of some, maybe all, of the hovercrafts, the Merovingian's henchmen, some story boards and other stuff. Our senior producer, Stuart Roch, spent some weeks on location in Australia and was able to take a bunch of photographs of the sets. We all of course had DVDs of the first movie that we were able to review for reference."

Like most other aspects of *Enter The Matrix*'s tight two-year development, though, nailing the look of this cyber-obsessed universe wasn't as simple as copying an aesthetic and then calling it a day. No, Robert and the rest of the art department had the challenge of replicating the tonal shift seen in the colour palette of the real world versus the Matrix, having to communicate the visual differences between each in a similarly subtle way to how the movies did.

Robert notes one particular problem that he and the folks at Warner Bros kept coming back to, "Getting the greenish quality in the Matrix to everybody's satisfaction," he reveals. "Owen Paterson, the movie's production designer explained to us that he never felt that the DVDs got it right." This wasn't ideal considering Robert had been using these as a primary reference. "To be honest, I don't recall the exact issue, but I think at the time the method for shifting colour in film was called 'colour timing' and it was a manual/analogue process. For whatever reason, when the DVDs were made, that quality was not matched exactly and so we were off."

The Matrix's fondness for green was well cemented even before Shiny Entertainment's involvement, but especially so by the time *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* entered simultaneous production and doubled down on it. After frequent disagreements and continuous tweaks around the subject, Shiny Entertainment eventually managed to implement a distinctive difference in colour grading between scenes that took place in and outside of the virtual space. However, to this day Robert admits that it was very frustrating and that "I don't think we ever really solved the problem completely".

Enter The Matrix running parallel to the efforts of Neo's main adventure meant that Jada Pinkett-Smith's Niobe and Anthony Wong's Ghost – crew members of the Logos ship – were ideal candidates to be fleshed out as the game's lead protagonists. Whereas the movie would only see the pair crop up for a scene or two, only here could you find out how they impacted events while off-screen. Players were even able to select which revolutionist to play as, so as to witness further variations of the game's exclusive story and encourage repeat playthroughs.

One example is the car chase sequence that takes place immediately after the opening post office level. Opt to play as Niobe and you'll be behind the wheel, evading agents and pursuing police officers as you navigate streets according to the Operator's commands. Play as Ghost, meanwhile, and you're suddenly the trigger man, peering outside the passenger's seat window to take aim and gun down as many threats as possible. Though nowhere near as meaningful as electing to take the blue or the red pill, minor changes like this helped to break up the third-person portions.

MUCH MORE THAN JUST DODGING BULLETS

1V1 FIGHTS

■ Entering the right password into the hack menu unlocked an unadvertised 1v1 fighting mode, where two players could recreate iconic duels from the movie trilogy. These scenarios were predetermined and functioned the same as the main game's boss fights, serving as a fun Easter egg rather than a full game mode.

BULLET TIME

■ *The Matrix*'s signature bullet time can be accessed in *Enter The Matrix* through what's known as 'focus', where players can perform more effective, slow-motion actions in combat and gunplay whenever the meter is charged. Shooting in mid-air, running along buildings and kicking off walls is all possible in stylistic fashion.

» [GameCube] Niobe and Ghost are both well equipped to recreate Neo's amazing bullet dodge from the first movie when engaging focus.

» [GameCube] Segments that take place outside of the Matrix are fleeting but reflect a cooler colour palette.

» [GameCube] *Reloaded*'s ghostly twins return in *Enter The Matrix*, chasing Niobe and Ghost through tunnels before joining the iconic freeway chase.

» [GameCube] Fight choreographer Yuen Woo-ping's direction had influence on live-action segments and in-engine cutscenes, as demonstrated by Niobe's cartwheeling.

» [GameCube] When sprinting at full speed Ghost does his best impression of the Tom Cruise run.

» [GameCube] Wooden stake at the ready! A visit to the Merovingian's manor from *The Matrix Reloaded* soon leads to a vampire battle.

Speaking of which, Shiny determined early on that its *Enter The Matrix* game wouldn't feel authentic without adapting the first movie's standout moment into gameplay. The image of Neo leaning back on that cityscape rooftop, dodging bullets in slow motion all as the camera swerves with his trench coat slowly flapping in the wind, had instantly engrained itself in pop culture. Remedy's *Max Payne* set a precedent for a bullet-time mechanic in games just two years after sci-fi fans witnessed this moment aghast, but Shiny's take worked just as elegantly if not more, keeping the action smooth whenever 'focus' was engaged by having manoeuvres like wall runs and cartwheels be contextual.

David Perry thinks it one of the best ways *Enter The Matrix* captured the franchise's cinematic quality. "When you experienced it," he says, "it would add so much drama to a moment that would normally be over in just a couple of seconds. Bullet time was used in some other games after the movie came out, I can't imagine the *Max Payne* game without it. It turned out not to be as big a technical hurdle as expected, but I do love that an idea like that can become part of gaming forever."

Despite being one of the most expensive games ever made at the time, the project was subject to a lot of stress due to the tight two-year deadline. Warner Bros was adamant in having the game release alongside *The Matrix Reloaded* in May of 2003 and reached a point where funding became an issue. This led to original publisher Interplay losing the rights and an unexpected ally to step in. "Atari bought our company just to get control of the licence," David recalls. "[They] turned out to be a big supporter of the project, so despite all the turmoil it was worth that giant move."

Enter The Matrix eventually released on GameCube, PC, Xbox and PS2 to middling reviews, with many critics citing its inherent repetition, lack of polish and inability to excel in any one of its core gameplay aspects. Even still, most came to appreciate just how well the game integrated into the wider *Matrix* canon, with special attention paid to the visuals, actor performances and fun implementation of bullet time. Such a tight development turnaround was the root cause for many of the finished game's issues, but the project still serves as an exemplar that future studios can use for adapting other entertainment media into a videogame.

When asked what advice he would pass onto any prospective developers working on a tie-in to the upcoming *Matrix* reboot scheduled to release in 2021, David doesn't mince his words. "If they have not already started, I'd recommend they launch a year after the movie. For many reasons they really need Lana [Wachowski] to spend time dedicated to the gameplay after the movie is out. The game could be absolutely incredible given the time, funding and talent that she can bring to the table."

Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come

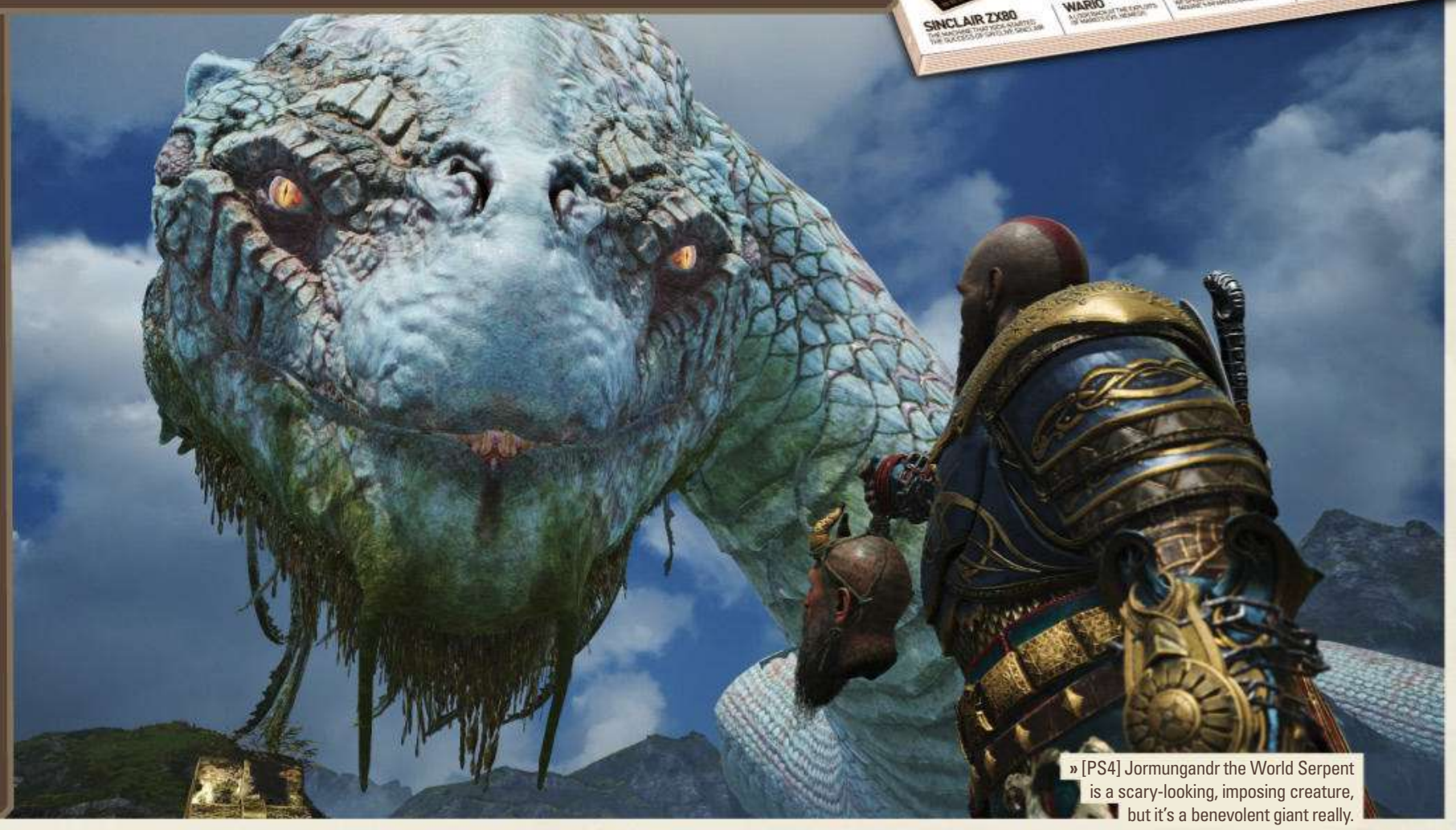
Info

- **System:** PS4
- **Year:** 2018
- **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment
- **Developer:** SIE Santa Monica Studio
- **Key People:** Cory Barlog (director), Derek Daniels (designer), Rafael Grassetti (character art lead), Bear McCreary (composer)

Go Deeper

» The team also considered placing Kratos in Egyptian mythology, but instead opted for Norse. We think they made the right choice.

» If you're interested in the game's development, check out the *Raising Kratos* documentary on PlayStation's YouTube channel at bit.ly/kratosdoc.



» [PS4] Jormungandr the World Serpent is a scary-looking, imposing creature, but it's a benevolent giant really.

Sheathe your Blades Of Chaos and grab your Leviathan Axe, as we're about to cut into SIE Santa Monica's epic reinvention. Discover how the team reinvented Kratos and created not only the best God Of War, but one of the best examples of a reboot

Words by Drew Sleep

GOD OF WAR

THE BACKGROUND

If there's a videogaming champion that won't go gently into the good night without a fight, it's Kratos. By 2014 the shouty murder machine had spun his twirly-whirly Blades Of Chaos across seven *God Of War* games, and Sony thought he was starting to look tired. His last game, *Ascension*, hadn't wowed critically or commercially, so the publisher was keen to put the big guy to sleep.

SIE Santa Monica had other ideas, though. The team knew there was still life in the sanguine Spartan and tasked series veteran Corey Barlog with creating a concept for a new *God Of War* title, an audacious reinvention that Sony could not refuse. Corey and his team thought it best to break the franchise's rules and reinvent everything. Kratos had ruined the Greek pantheon beyond repair, so it was decided that the PlayStation icon would tread new ground: the land of Norse mythology. In addition to this new setting, the game's story would hold a greater emphasis; following in the path Naughty Dog had blazed with the *The Last Of Us*.

THE GAME

God Of War (2018) is a much more serious affair compared to its hedonistic and two-dimensional forebears. It's noticeably slower, both in terms of story and moment-to-moment gameplay, which reflects this older, bearded version of Kratos we now find ourselves in control of. This new approach allows us to see the PlayStation icon in a new light. The antihero has forsaken his rage-filled persona and discarded his Blades Of Chaos in the hopes of living a simple life with his new family. The story begins with Kratos cremating his recently deceased wife, Faye, and finding himself stepping into a reluctant father role to his sickly son, Atreus, as they embark on an arduous journey to scatter Faye's ashes at the highest peak in the world of Midgard. The relationship between father and son forms the core of *God Of War*, the centre point to which everything else revolves around – everything from exposition and story, to traversal, puzzles and combat is deeply rooted in this new uncertain team of Kratos and his son – and it works brilliantly.

» [PS4] Kratos lovingly refers to Atreus throughout the game as, 'Boy!' You'll be mimicking the grumpy old man before the game is over.

» [PS4] Kratos' journey will take him into different realms, like the luminescent and bug-like world of the elves, Alfheim.

» [PS4] What? Did you think the gore and executions were thrown out? Of course not!

» [PS4] There aren't a great deal of actual gods to fight in this reboot, it feels like the humble beginnings that will snowball into something epic.

Things of note

TALKING HEAD

Like a macabre podcast host, the severed head of Mimir regales Kratos and Atreus with countless stories as they explore Midgar.

STAR POWER

Notable talent was brought in to voice the game's characters, including Christopher Judge (Kratos), Sunny Suljic (Atreus) and Jeremy Davies (The Stranger).

LAY DOWN THE LORE

The dev team has managed to cram encyclopaedias worth of fascinating Norse lore into the game, hidden in scrolls, woodcuts and Mimir's ramblings.

OLD WOUNDS

The game cleverly alludes to Kratos' past early on when a bandage falls from his wrist. It's a subtle nod, but one that hits hard thanks to Christopher Judge's performance.

SOWING SEEDS

Late on in the game you discover a veritable treasure trove from someone who, like Kratos, has managed to journey into new worlds. It makes you think, where could our hero end up next?

Obviously, the main draw of a *God Of War* game has always been the action-packed combat, and that has not changed. Here, however, hacking and slashing is much more intimate, as the camera adopts an over-the-shoulder approach, like in *Resident Evil 4*. This means skirmishes end up feeling a lot more brutal, and you have to rely on Atreus' vocal observations to avoid getting a sword buried between your shoulder blades. Speaking of the son of Kratos, he's an invaluable tool when it comes to vanquishing the beasts of Midgard. By pressing the square button, you can order him to fire an arrow at a foe, distracting the creature so you can jump in and tear it apart. Later, both Kratos and Atreus learn to use various magical abilities, increasing the depth of the combat system in a satisfying way as you become more familiar with it.

Notably, Kratos has a new weapon, the Leviathan Axe, which he has inherited from his wife, and we'd go as far to say it's one of the greatest weapons we've encountered in gaming. It looks nice, for one, and the sound design works with enemy animations to make it actually *feel* like a powerful cleaver. But what we love about it most is its recall power – much like Thor in the Marvel universe, Kratos can aim and lob this bladed hunk of steel at foes and structures, and then summon it back with a tap of the triangle button. The moment when it returns into the Spartan's expecting hand feels *so right*, it makes us all giddy thinking about it.

Utilising Atreus and the Leviathan Axe is paramount to exploring Midgard, too. Frequently you'll encounter light puzzles that need to be solved by harnessing Atreus' magic arrows to form a path, or the freezing power of Kratos' axe to hold a mechanism in place. SIE Santa Monica has hidden plenty of treasures, armour and lore nuggets in the world, and uncovering them as you explore Midgard in a nonlinear fashion is one of the most enjoyable aspects of the game.

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

It's not very often a reboot surpasses everything that has come before it, yet SIE Santa Monica knocked it out of the park with *God Of War*. Creating yet another sequel or prequel using the established rules would've likely killed the series outright, however the team has successfully taken what made the original games so good and forged them with the best parts of what makes modern gaming so great today. The combat is pitch-perfect, the story is emotional and compelling, the world is awe-inspiring and satisfying to explore, and yet it is still unmistakably *God Of War*.

And it seems the studio is not keen to rest on its laurels. This year, a follow-up was teased during a PlayStation 5 event. We only have a title reveal to go on so far, but if SIE Santa Monica's 2018 efforts are anything to go by, *God Of War: Ragnarok* is something well worth sharpening your axe for.

THE MAKING OF SABRE WULF

AFTER ONE SCORE YEARS THE MAN RETURNED AT SPECIAL REQUEST FROM THOSE CONCERNED HIS GOAL TO FACE THE WULF AGAIN AND PROVE HE STILL REMAINED ITS BANE BUT WOULD HE FIND THE STARS ALIGNED? OR HAD THE WORLD LEFT HIM BEHIND?

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

» Programmer Trevor Attwood was one of the bright sparks on Rare's handheld team.

For Chris and Tim Stamper – founders of Ultimate, then Rare, and all-round Brit-soft royalty – Sabreman was a case of unfinished business. Their pith-helmeted hero starred in four 8-bit games, beginning with *Sabre Wulf* in 1984 and quickly followed by *Underwurlde*, *Knight Lore* and *Pentagram*. The proposed fifth game in the series, *Mire Mare*, was never released and became clouded in rumour and rampant speculation. The truth is that design work on the game did begin, and Tim Stamper created the cover-art, but no actual coding was done. In 1986 the Stampers swapped Ultimate for Rare, computers for consoles, and *Mire Mare* was lost in the transition.

But the series would live on. First, Sabreman's nemesis Sabrewulf inspired a playable fighter in Rare's 1994 coin-op *Killer Instinct*, then Sabreman himself popped up in the 2000 Nintendo 64 sequel *Banjo-Tooie*, where it was amusingly revealed that he'd been frozen in a block of ice since the Eighties. Now thawed out and warmed up, he was ready to headline another game.

"During 2001, we received a design document from Chris, Tim and the Rare management team," says programmer Trevor Attwood, who'd previously worked on the SNES *Donkey Kong Country* games and was now a member of Rare's handheld team. "This new project was targeting the Game Boy Advance and was supposed to be the resurrection of the Sabreman brand, and so returned to the original battle between him and the 'Wulf'."

As Chris and Tim were heavily involved in the design, we have to wonder if any elements of *Mire Mare* were included? After all, the unreleased game was supposed to have more in common with the original *Sabre Wulf* than the later isometric adventures. "It's conceivable there could have been elements of the original *Mire Mare* game in the design, but this was never mentioned by Chris or Tim during discussions," says Trevor. "I did suggest that *Mire Mare* may be an appropriate title for the new game, as I was aware of the history of the series, but after some thought it was rejected in favour of *Sabre Wulf*, as it was more of a franchise

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** THQ
- **DEVELOPER:** RARE
- **RELEASED:** 2004
- **PLATFORM:** GBA
- **GENRE:** PLATFORM RPG

"THE MANAGEMENT TEAM THOUGHT THAT WITH SABREMAN BEING AN 'OLD EXPLORER' THIS COULD CAUSE PROBLEMS"
TREVOR ATTWOOD

reboot. I don't believe that it was ever planned to be *Mire Mare*. It contained many elements that would only have worked on the faster processor of the GBA, and wouldn't have been feasible on the Spectrum."

Those 'elements' include an overworld map, where Sabreman can explore various areas, interact with the various townsfolk, and gain access to the many lairs of the revived Wulf. In the lairs the perspective shifts to a traditional 2D platformer and in each one you have to reach the sleeping Wulf, retrieve the treasure he'd stolen, then leg it back to the entrance with him snapping at your heels. Perhaps due to his advanced years (something that is joked about throughout the game), Sabreman has no sword or magic to defend himself with, and has to rely on the local wildlife to help him progress (see the Animal Magic box out). To banish the Wulf the player has to recover the scattered parts of a sacred amulet, just like in the original game.

Trevor reveals that one element from the design document had to be discarded. "Things changed rapidly when we began development. A 'picture in picture' concept was implemented that was supposed to show a smaller version of the main screen, where you could see the Wulf and its position in relation to the player. We found it took up too much memory and didn't really add anything to the gameplay, so it was dropped pretty quickly. It also caused a load of technical issues."

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

RC PRO-AM (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: NES
YEAR: 1988

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY
SYSTEM: SNES
YEAR: 1994

GOLDENEYE 007
SYSTEM: N64
YEAR: 1997

One of the first tasks Trevor did was write a new audio system. He explains, "Chris Stamper called me into his office one day and said that the GBA audio system was too quiet, and asked me to investigate. I found that for each channel of audio that was playing, the system would halve the volume in order to prevent sound distortion. Nintendo's reasoning was that if you played two sounds together, the waveforms would combine, making the sound twice as loud, so it halved the volume to compensate. But what actually happens is that the waveforms would average themselves out and no distortions would occur. I did contact Nintendo about this issue and asked if it would change the software, but it refused. So I wrote a proprietary system that solved the problem and was subsequently used in all of Rare's GBA titles. You'll ▶

» [GBA] Having retrieved the treasure from the Wulf's maw, Sabreman has to exit the lair as fast as his little legs will carry him.

» [GBA] The game is littered with reference to old Ultimate games, like the *Atic Atac* rug and *Underwurlde* statue found in the Blackwyche village hall.

Animal Magic

FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO USE THEM

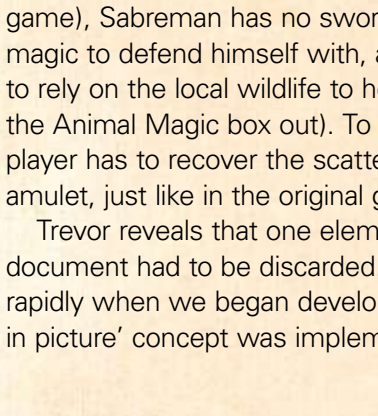
BLUBBA
The first creature you encounter is perhaps the most useful. Jump on this sleepy bear's belly and you'll be bounced high into the air, over obstacles and onto ledges.

SERPENT
An essential creature to have in your inventory. This reptile floats wherever you drop it, creating a handy step. Better than the similar Misti as it doesn't disappear.

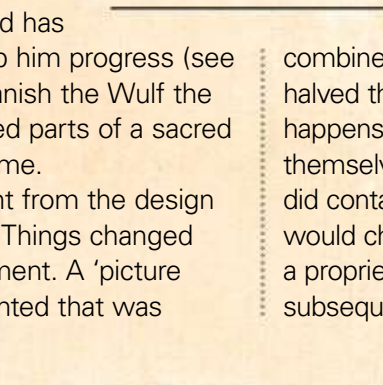
WITCH
This flying sorceress doesn't like sharing airspace with others. If flying enemies are blocking your way, unleash her and she'll shoot upwards, destroying them.

STICKY
This pool of green goo will stick any enemy to the spot. This is really handy to use against annoying enemies than move along set paths or keep jumping.

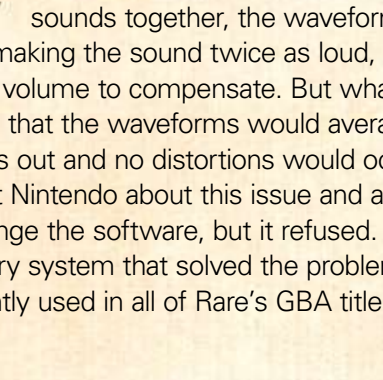
BLOATER
Release the floaty Bloater then jump in its mouth and allow it to carry you up and over obstacles. You can actually control its direction to some degree.



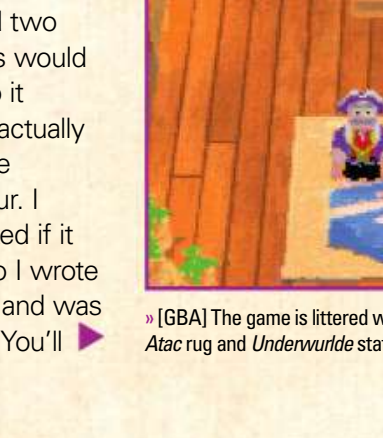
BOOMER
Place it next to an enemy, or obstacle blocking your way, then wait three seconds and kaboom, the path is cleared. Just make sure you're not caught in the blast.



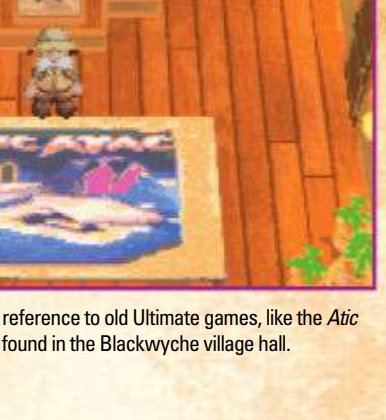
GOLEM
Drop this stone lump to block the way, preventing enemies from passing. It also doubles as a handy platform, or a staircase if combined with Serpents.



CLUB
This dumb brute is similar to Bigfoot, but is more effective as he kills enemies rather than just kicks them. It will also smash blocks that bar your way.



WIZARD
Looking very much like Melkhior from *Knight Lore*, Wizard will draw his wand and zap everything in his path, including those massive blobby things.



BIGFOOT
Mr Sasquatch will move in one direction, kicking the living daylights out of anything in its way. It doesn't destroy enemies, just gives them a punt along the path.

Pint-sized Rare

A ROUNDUP OF RARE'S OTHER GBA RELEASES

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

RELEASED: 2003

This genuine SNES classic had previously been ported to the GBC, but this version is far closer to the original, despite the slightly washed-out visuals. Throw in some new bonus modes and GBA-only features and you've got the perfect platformer for playing on the go.

BANJO-KAZOOIE: GRUNTY'S REVENGE

RELEASED: 2003

This exclusive handheld adventure for the bear-bird combo takes place between the first and second N64 games, and carries over a lot of the charm from those two games. On the downside, it's rather short, and the sheer number of collection tasks can become tiresome.

DKC 2: DIDDY'S KONG QUEST

RELEASED: 2004

Arguably the highlight of the original trilogy, the sequel receives a very faithful translation to the Game Boy Advance. Everything from the original is here and then some, making it a compulsory purchase for fans both old and new alike.

notice that many of our games are so loud you have to physically turn the GBA's volume down."

After the sound, the next job was the 'look' of the game. "We'd previously finished a Game Boy Color version of the N64 title, *Mickey Speedway USA*, and *Sabre Wulf* was going to be our first GBA title. As with any new hardware, we were uncertain exactly what we could do with it. We initially thought we could just make things look a bit better than a GBC title, due to it having more colours and memory." Trevor reveals that it took a movement within Rare to open the team's eyes to what was possible. "During this period, Martin Wakeley, who designed many N64 titles like *Blast Corps* and *Jet Force Gemini*, was annoyed at the long development times of console projects. He saw the handheld team producing games at a much faster rate and told Rare's management that he wanted to move onto GBA development.

"So Martin took several N64 team members and started a separate GBA team and began developing a game named *BLOGS*, which was similar in concept to the old 8-bit game *Little Computer People*. Because Martin's team came from the N64 they approached the development of graphics differently than our team, which was progressing up from the GBC. These differences were epitomised one day when Gary Richards, one of the *Sabre Wulf* designers, visited the *BLOGS* team to see what it was up to. He came back with a printout of one of the test screens and said, 'We need to do this'. It looked far better than anything we had planned for *Sabre Wulf*. What Martin's artists were doing was rendering a background as if it was destined for the N64, then downgrading it to fit the GBA hardware. This was something we simply hadn't considered before and it led to us scrapping all of our background graphics and starting again using the same technique."

> "CHRIS STAMPER WAS HOPING THAT THE GAME WOULD MARK THE RESURRECTION OF SABREMAN AS A MAJOR IP"
> TREVOR ATTWOOD

***BLOGS* was soon binned, but it basically defined the graphical style of *Sabre Wulf*, and without it, the game would have looked quite different.** The visuals were further enhanced by the use of a masking system. "Another programmer named Rob Harrison had the idea of writing a system that allowed Sabreman to interact with the overworld map, allowing him to cleanly move in front of and behind scenery. This brought a level of depth to the graphics reminiscent to Ultimate's isometric games like *Knight Lore*. It worked well, but in retrospect, the designs of the overworld maps were fairly

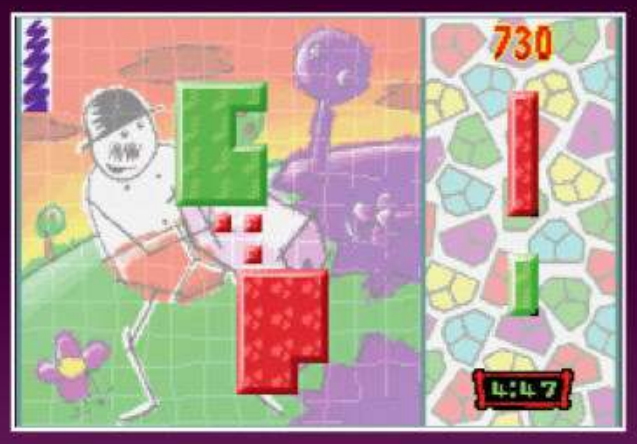
» [GBA] Sabreman must use his animal support team to safely reach the Wulf's hideout.

» [GBA] And you thought those rampaging rhinos back in the jungle were a pain.

BANJO PILOT

RELEASED: 2005

An appealing alternative to *Mario Kart: Super Circuit* that features nine characters from the *Banjo* universe swooping around 16 twisting courses. For a GBA game the 3D effect is surprisingly effective and while it's no *MK* beater, it's definitely not an also-ran.



IT'S MR PANTS

RELEASED: 2005

Proof that you shouldn't judge a game by its cover. The jolly Y-front-wearing mascot from Rare's old website is billed as the 'star' of the show, but behind all the silliness is a fiendish puzzle game that delivers *Tetris* levels of longevity. Pants by name, not by nature.

DKC 3: DIXIE KONG'S DOUBLE TROUBLE!

RELEASED: 2005

The Kong clan return in their third game, which looks and sounds the best yet because Rare had really mastered the Game Boy Advance by this point in time. As for the gameplay, it fights against the law of diminishing returns and wins. Just about…

» [GBA] Local shopkeeper Cookie (nod, wink) will sell you useful items in return for gold.

» The game's advertising was clearly indebted to Ultimate's *Gunfright*.

» [GBA] To retrieve a piece of the amulet you have to venture into the twisted Dr Dolittle-Goode's lab.

» [GBA] The various areas are all named after old Ultimate games. This location borders Dragonskulle Town and the Temple of Imhotep.

simple and never really showed off the capabilities of the system. Rob was only on the team for a matter of weeks, as he was moved off to head up the *Kameo* team which was experiencing development problems. I then took over the main development of *Sabre Wulf* until its completion – which lasted far longer than anybody wanted."

Although development began in 2001, the game didn't actually release until 2004. Trevor reveals that the delay was due to wrangling with publisher THQ. "The game's overall development took about a year, but when we'd finished it, there was no publishing contract signed. Rare and Microsoft wanted THQ to publish the game because they had already worked with THQ on the Xbox version of *Conker's Bad Fur Day*. I personally felt that THQ was a poor choice for publisher because it was more interested in taking on projects that were already well-known brands. And considering Rare was using *Sabre Wulf* as a test project to see if consumers were still interested in the property, I felt we needed a different publisher. THQ was more interested in the GBA game *Banjo Pilot*, because Banjo was already widely known, and so *Sabre Wulf* was shelved for a year while contracts were ironed out."

While the game was in limbo, Trevor's team got busy producing a faithful port of *Donkey Kong Country* for the GBA. After that was released in 2003, they were asked to dig up *Sabre Wulf* and make a few… changes. "Sabreman went through an identity crisis," he says. "The management team were unsure of his global appeal, and thought that with Sabreman being an 'old explorer' with overtones of the British Empire and colonisation, this could cause problems. So, different voices were tried, including an angry Scotsman and even a rapping Australian, which generated a genuine, bulging-eyes 'what the fuck?' moment from the development team. Even after all these years I still can't get Australian Sabreman's phrases like 'Put another shrimp on the bar-bar-bar-barrrbie!' out of my head. Thankfully it was never used."

***Sabre Wulf* was eventually released in early 2004 to mixed reviews.** It received 4/10 from *games™*, 6/10 from *Edge*, and 8/10 from *Eurogamer*, where Kristan Reed said that it "deserves to be heralded among the very best titles on the format". Your correspondent championed it in *RG* #3, noting that it was quite an easy game, but summing up that "there's definitely some of that old Ultimate magic at play here" [I feel it's underrated, too – Ed].

Regardless of the reviews, unfortunately the game underperformed commercially. "The product was never pushed to generate enough public interest," believes Trevor. "Chris Stamper was hoping that the game would do well, and if so, mark the resurrection of Sabreman as a major IP and trigger Rare to develop more games with the character on other platforms. But given the perceived lack of global appeal, and the lack of advertising from the publisher, Sabreman was never given enough of a chance."

Talking of new adventures on other platforms, the character was set to return in an Xbox 360 game called *Sabreman Stampede*. The title, which evolved from the unreleased GameCube game *Donkey Kong Racing*, was supposed to be a breezy, open-world adventure set in Africa, but it was cancelled in 2005. Could we see other Sabreman games in the future? "I doubt it," says Trevor. "If Rare did retain the rights when the Stampers left the business in 2006, the lack of appeal of the character in today's market remains a problem."

We should be thankful then that Saberman did at least return for one final adventure, and while it wasn't the mythical *Mire Mare*, it went a long way to laying that persistent ghost to rest. ✱

> The [Atari] office then moved to Slough, but was referred to by Atari as the London office – close enough, I guess!
>
> Jon Dean

JON DEAN

He was a videogame producer before the role even existed and has overseen the creation of a multitude of hit games. From the tumultuous rise and fall of Atari to management consultancy and the halls of Midway and Electronic Arts, this is Jon 'The Guv' Dean, in the chair

Words by Graeme Mason

Living far away from the coast meant family holidays were vital for a young man about to start his videogame journey. Inspired by the glowing displays and excitement of the arcades, Jon applied for a job at Atari's new international division in Cheshunt, just before its offices moved to Slough. Taking on the mantle of 'product support specialist', Jon supported boss Jon Norledge, promoting the Atari product line throughout the UK and Ireland. With his foot in the door, he proceeded to work at Activision and Argonaut before making the move stateside in 1998. From the 8-bit era, to the 16-bits, Nintendo Wii and beyond, there are ups and downs aplenty in the career of this games producer.

» Moving to Utah was a shock to the system in more ways than one for Jon.

Hey, Jon. Can you tell us when you first fell in love with videogames?
While on a family holiday at Boscombe Pier, I recall spending most of my pocket money on a submarine game where you looked through a periscope, aiming a cross-hair at ships moving across a virtual sea line. It was pleasing to press the big red button and launch your torpedoes – that combination of audio and visual made for a very exciting and engaging experience. Later, I remember becoming aware of *Space Invaders* in pubs and I used to love the sit-down version where two could play alternately. Then the Sinclair ZX81 began to change things, allowing enthusiasts to dabble because it was so low in cost. As I recall, games were considered to be trivial and unworthy, so the burgeoning industry became known as 'home computing'. But of course, the primary use became games!

How did you start working in the games industry and what was your first role?
I got a job at Atari's international division when they opened up in the UK, in tech and end-user support. Initially it was based in Cheshunt, at Ingersoll, formerly Atari's UK distributor. The office then moved to Slough, but was referred to by Atari as the London office – close enough, I guess! As a product support specialist, my boss and I, Jon Norledge, supported the entire Atari product line sold throughout the UK and Ireland. In those days, everything was snail mail or phone calls. If you were an Atari 400/800 user and wanted help with the – very buggy – 6502 Assembler Editor, your call would typically end up at our desks. If you wanted to make a custom cable to connect your electric typewriter to the serial port of your home computer, your letter would be answered by us with a wiring diagram. If you were a kid who was stuck on a level of *Pac-Man* and called the Atari hotline, you would get put through to Captain Atari – AKA one of the Jons!

Eventually you moved to Atarisoft with Jon Norledge?
That's right, making Atari IP for non-Atari home computer systems. This was my first experience working in development, coordinating third-party developers – a producer job in today's terminology.

What game did you work on first?
My first project was actually non-game. Atari was part of Warner Communications and had ties with Warner Home Video. So the idea was to make an inventory management system for video stores, using Atari home computers, to show how versatile they were. I coined the name Atari Video F.I.L.M.S. for the project – the film, inventory and loan management system. I got to set up systems in real video stores and help the managers and staff use the program. As I recall, we had a stack of four Atari 810 disk drives churning away managing each database. It was clunky – but it worked. Mostly. Then I helped to coordinate game projects, including conversions of *Pole Position*, *Pac-Man* and *Dig Dug*, for systems including the ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC, BBC Micro and Dragon 32. My mum couldn't understand why I got paid to 'just play games all day'. I wish. It got very scary when Atari was sold – I had just gotten married, got a house and a dog!

That must have been a difficult time?
The first I knew of it was when I got back to the office from a video store check-up one morning to find most of the staff being ushered into the main conference room. I went to join them and the managing director told me I couldn't go in. I went upstairs to Atarisoft and it was almost deserted

» A flyer for one of Jon's early projects, the Atari Video distribution system.

SELECTED TIMELINE

GAMES

- **POLE POSITION** [1984] VARIOUS
- **MS PAC MAN** [1984] VARIOUS
- **SPACE SHUTTLE** [1984] VARIOUS
- **RESCUE ON FRACTALUS** [1985] VARIOUS
- **LONE RAIDER** [1985] ATARI 8-BIT
- **BALLBLAZER** [1985] VARIOUS
- **THE EIDOLON** [1985] VARIOUS
- **SPINDIZZY** [1985] VARIOUS
- **ALIENS** [1986] VARIOUS
- **PRODIGY** [1986] C64, AMSTRAD CPC, ZX SPECTRUM
- **HACKER II** [1986] VARIOUS
- **DANDY** [1986] VARIOUS
- **SUPER SPRINT** [1987] VARIOUS
- **FIRETRAP** [1987] C64, AMSTRAD CPC, ZX SPECTRUM
- **INTERNATIONAL KARATE+** [1987] VARIOUS
- **BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA** [1987] VARIOUS
- **ENDURO RACER** [1987] VARIOUS
- **RAMPAGE** [1987] VARIOUS
- **SUPER HANG-ON** [1987] VARIOUS
- **AFTER BURNER** [1987] VARIOUS
- **WONDERBOY** [1987] VARIOUS
- **R-TYPE** [1988] VARIOUS
- **TUSKER** [1989] VARIOUS
- **NIGHT SHIFT** [1990] VARIOUS
- **THE LAST NINJA 3** [1991] AMIGA, C64, ZX SPECTRUM
- **RACE DRIVIN'** [1992] VARIOUS
- **STAR FOX** [1993] SNES
- **KING ARTHUR'S WORLD** [1993] SNES
- **POWERMONGER** [1994] VARIOUS
- **MORTAL COIL** [1995] PC
- **SOCCER NATION** [1995] PC
- **MLB SLUGFEST** [2003-2004] VARIOUS
- **NFL BLITZ PRO** [2003] GAMECUBE, PS2, XBOX
- **NFL STREET** [2004] GAMECUBE, PS2, XBOX
- **MADDEN 06** [2005] VARIOUS
- **NASCAR 07** [2006] PS2, PSP, XBOX
- **SUPERMAN RETURNS** [2006] PS2, XBOX, XBOX 360
- **TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR** [2008-2007] VARIOUS
- **NERF N-STRIKE ELITE** [2009] WII
- **TETRIS BATTLE** [2010] PC
- **MONOPOLY HOTELS** [2012] IOS

▶ – turns out the company was being sold to Jack Tramiel, and a skeleton staff was to remain. I was among them, moved into a marketing role, I assume because I was cheap.

But it turned into a great opportunity...
I got my hands dirty with the launch of the XE product line, and then the ST. I got to evangelise the products to retailers and distributors, spearhead the push into education, talk to user groups, get software developers to support Atari platforms plus help persuade a magazine publisher to launch the official Atari magazine. An incredible experience.

Did you meet Jack Tramiel?
Oh yes. He had a reputation for firing people who told him things he didn't want to hear. For him, Atari was all about the new ST and making it the first mass-market personal computer. It was all about cheap 'power without the price', but I remember arguing that Atari was 'the' games brand, and the opportunity for the ST was as a 16-bit gaming platform. I had provisionally lined up leading-edge 16-bit games from FireIron – which became Psygnosis – as launch titles, as well as cool MIDI music tools from Island Records. Mr Tramiel didn't think this was the coup I did and I remember him telling me why I was wrong and the problem with 'old Atari people', fixated with games. I assumed I was fired, but hey, if you're going to get fired, it might as well be by the man himself. Instead, he said he admired my initiative, even if wrong, and I would now work as part of the software development group!

> "I assumed I was fired, but hey, if you're going to get fired, it might as well be by the man himself"
> Jon Dean

What happened after Atari?
I teamed up briefly with a local distributor I knew called Software Express in Birmingham. Then one day, Rod Cousens called me and said he wanted to set up a studio to co-ordinate all of Activision's European software development activities. I knew Rod from his days at Argus. He started Electric Dreams as an affiliate publisher of Activision as it started to ramp up its European business. Apparently Rod had been impressed by my initiative at Atari, so I started Software Studios in Southampton, working closely with Rod and his team.

What was your role there?
Software Studios was a small team of producers who managed external developers. Sometimes we would buy original IPs and help those get finished. Others were licences that Rod would secure, for which we needed to come up with designs, find programmers and artists, project manage them to completion, manage all the QA and ultimately deliver gold masters. Over time, as Rod added more affiliate publishing deals, we ended up managing development for others, including System 3. I think we built more than 250 SKUs over two years.

» Jon's first computer, an Atari 800.

What was your favourite game to work on during this period?
Two come to mind: one was *Nejo* (released as *Prodigy*), an original IP. It was quite a coup for us because we were trying to woo star developers to come and work with us and Mev Dinc took some persuading. That was the start of a career-long friendship for us, and I learned so much about being an indie developer from Mev, as well as the needs of original IP creation. And then one of our first 16-bit games, *Super Sprint* – Rod knew a talented programmer from his Argus days, Nalin Sharma. Nalin in turn introduced us to some of his roommates from the CS class at his university, and they jumped at the chance to create *Super Sprint*. For me, it's one of the best coin-op conversions ever made, and when they graduated, I worked with them again and formed Attention To Detail, which became a star developer in its own right.

Did projects still sometimes run late despite your efforts?
Unfortunately. One of our first big titles that went late was our take on the movie *Aliens*. We ended up bringing all the developers into the Southampton office and literally living there day and night until it was done. We brought in anyone that we thought could help, slept on the floor and ate kebab and chips from the local greasy van. I remember Mev [Dinc] being so tired that he couldn't see straight one morning, so I helped him by going through a print-out of his code, trying to find bugs and him telling me that my Z80 was worse than his! But it was a rough time in my life for personal reasons. We had just lost a baby, and my wife was at home

» [SNES] Jon worked on the Super Nintendo game *King Arthur's World* while at Argonaut.

» [PC] Crush!'s first game was the *Doom* clone, *Mortal Coil*.

an hour away while I was stuck at the office. One night after a rough phone call home, I decided to drive home at 3.00am and fell asleep at the wheel. I was so lucky there was no oncoming traffic and I was OK. The job pressure was huge; the game was slipping schedule and the movie opening was a huge deal for Activision.

Why were there two versions of *Aliens*?
Activision US had internal development and generally despised anything we created in Europe, where we used third-party developers. They had hard drives and 6502 systems, we had cassettes and Z80 systems. But we tended to be faster and cheaper, with a higher hit ratio, so when their *Aliens* slipped, we were tasked with trying to get a game to market to meet the movie opening. We gave it our best shot, but in the end they actually shipped before we did. So much egg on face for us. When our game finally got released, there were no 'thank yous', just this feeling of failure despite such heroic efforts from the team, and being so exhausted. Activision US had no plans to release our game in the US, but eventually, we released the US one in EU after we shipped our version, and they released our version in the USA. Interestingly, our game did very well and got rave reviews in Europe, whereas the US audience generally disliked it. By comparison, the US version scored well with the US audience, but their game was not as well received in EU. Anyway, that crunch sucked for me, but I learned so much from the experience.

Why did you leave Activision?
I realised I had become quite good at project management through all of these experiences. I started my own consultancy company called Project Management Consultancy (PMC) with the idea that I could offer these services to the industry. I helped those graduates on *Super Sprint* to form a company, Attention To Detail, and offered development services. Rod hired me to help with some affiliate developers, and I was hired by Konix to put together all of the software for its Konix Multi System.

But shortly after wards you were working at another developer?
Another client was Marjacq, a literary and software agent that represented some of the best developers in Europe. I had met the owner, Jacqui Lyons, while at Activision – and one of her star clients was Argonaut. It became clear Argonaut had a lot of great opportunities, but were struggling with late delivery, so I put PMC on the back burner and agreed to devote most of my time to it and getting its software back on track. This freed up its brilliant owner, Jez San, to focus on what was known as the Mario Chip, an incredible opportunity he had forged with Nintendo. The outcome was the software side of the business working again and the chip, of course, was used for *Star Fox*.

Why did you leave Argonaut?
I left for personal reasons. The hours were long and it was a three hour drive home from their office in Colindale to my home in Wiltshire. Around the time of *Star Fox*, we had twins, and I needed to be home more. I wish it had been possible to stay longer, but I transitioned out, restarting PMC immediately, working with a group in Leeds run by Andy Craven and Ian Oliver, the guys behind Vektor Grafix. They were starting a new media group, and they wanted a software arm as well, called Sprytes. I opened its studio in Newbury, and recruited a small team. Among the titles we created was the Mega-CD version of *Populous* for Electronic Arts. When we amicably parted ways with Andy and Ian, we renamed ourselves Crush!.

A TECH TOO FAR

Jon weighs in on the doomed Konix Multisystem

"It was a brilliant idea, and [designer] Wyn Holloway had such passion and ambition to make it a success. I think this is also why it failed: the idea seemed so obvious, and everybody loved it. Wyn believed the hype and it led to unrealistic expectations about timeline and the financial realities of manufacturing at scale. In hindsight, I think my part of the project – the software – would have been OK had we launched. While not all of them were unique to the platform, there were a couple of killer apps, such as Jeff Minter's *Attack Of The Mutant Camels*, that would have driven sales. But we needed production units so that developers could create unique content, or at least added unique features that supported the Multisystem's various modes, as well as accessories like the chair. I think year two would have been really strong as it offered something quite visceral and physical compared to Nintendo's Famicom. But it wasn't to be."

MORE FROM JON

Five great games from The Guv

PRODIGY (1986)
■ The first game by Mev Dinc for Electric Dreams, and only his second game overall, *Prodigy* is a neat isometric adventure that has two distinctive gameplay aspects. It was one of the first isometric games to offer multidirectional scrolling and, in what we would today call an 'escort' mission, the player has to guide the game's eponymous kid, Nejo, around the maze – and it's no easy task.

ALIENS (1986)
■ Released in both UK and US flavours/flavors, *Aliens* is the big-budget cinematic adaptation that helped cement the Electric Dreams and Activision reputations. From the tense first-person exploration of the UK game to the accurate story representation of its counterpart from over the pond, there's been plenty for fans to get their thrusting teeth into in both games.

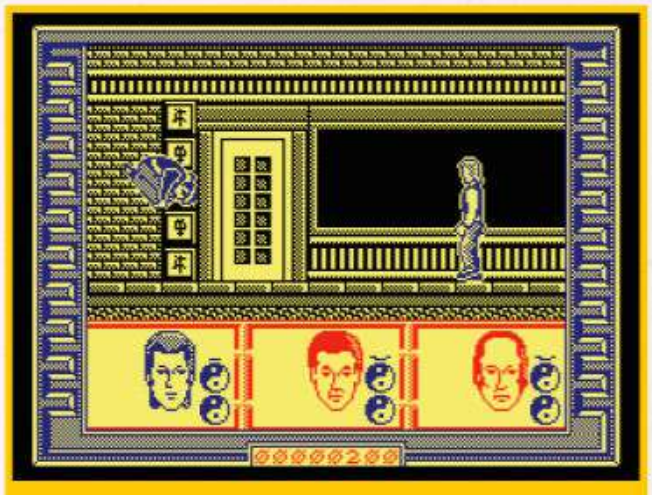
NIGHT SHIFT (1990)
■ This was a strange release for Lucasfilm to promote in 1990, although it was Jon's cadre of developers, Attention To Detail, who were the driving force behind the game. A weird platform-cum-puzzle amalgamation, it's a quality title with attractive graphics and deep gameplay for those willing to take a punt on it. Check out **Retro Gamer**'s making of *Night Shift* way back in issue 55.

STAR FOX (1993)
■ Known as *Starwing* in the UK, this was the first in the legendary shoot-'em-up series, and developed during Jon's time at Argonaut Software. Famous as the first Nintendo game to take advantage of the Super Nintendo's Super FX chip (also designed at Argonaut), its beautiful polygonal graphics and compelling gameplay ensured a mega hit for all involved.

SOCCER NATION (1995)
■ Ahead of its time by several years, *Soccer Nation* was an ambitious attempt to meld business, management and arcade modes to an online competitive football simulation. Taking control of the club's fortunes and players, the scope and potential was massive, which made its subsequent failure a bitter pill for Jon and his team.

> My role was to run the sports business, maintaining their high quality and still get them out in time
>
> Jon Dean

» [ZX Spectrum] The US version of *Aliens* followed the movie closely.



» [C64] Movie adaptation *Big Trouble In Little China*.

MD ON JD

Here's what veteran developer Mev Dinc thinks of Jon Dean

"I met Jon very early in my career, in 1986. I was so new to the industry, and meeting him and becoming lifelong friends is one of the most important things that happened to me. Jon was always helpful, and I benefitted greatly from his insights, and he was also a friendly and professional person at the same time. His role as producer and with project management skills was crucial in getting games done as efficiently and creatively as possible. *Prodigy* was only my second game, and it was very ambitious technically, effectively the first scrolling isometric game – both Rod Cousens and Jon wanted it and made me an offer I couldn't refuse! I'm proud to say that things never went wrong with my own game developments – but Jon always came to me when things went wrong with some of their other games. As a result, I was involved in rescuing some really big titles such as the Amstrad version of *Enduro Racer*, helping with *Aliens* C64 and, of course, doing the Spectrum, Amstrad and Commodore 64 versions of *Big Trouble In Little China*.

"Jon has many qualities that make him stand out from the crowd, the main ones being that he is very friendly, honest, professional and trustworthy. He was one of the first true professionals in the field of project management with the knowledge of game development and production, a role I still think is overlooked in our industry today. I am very pleased to have known him pretty much my entire career and to have him as a lifelong friend."

For more stories on Mev's days working for Electric Dreams and beyond, watch out for his book, *Life Is A Game*, out soon.

What did you develop at Crush!?
Our first release was *Mortal Coil*, an *Aliens*/*Doom*-inspired story featuring four characters and celeb voices. Then we created a series called *Sports Nation*, which was intended to be a fusion of arcade sports with management simulation. The idea was for a virtual world of sports athletes which you, and only you, would own. You could train your players and trade them, and play them in fixtures against other real players. The very first title was *Soccer Nation*, Crush! took investment, generated a lot of publicity, and even made our own TV commercial featuring a then-unknown Jason Statham. We did a publishing deal with Sunsoft in Japan, and thought we were unstoppable.

What happened?
Two things. One, we had built an online game when modems were few and slow. And two, the Japanese stock market crashed, and Sunsoft pulled their remaining money. We had to close down and sell off our assets. The title was picked up for a song by a publisher who rushed it out and put Jack Charlton's name on it. It didn't do well.

What instigated your move to the US in 1998?
I had received offers to work in the States, and after *Soccer Nation*, I had a young family, perhaps the only time I could have made such a move. I joined Kodiak, which had been formed by the creators of Sculptured Software, one of the premier developers of the Nineties. After they sold Sculptured to Acclaim, they started Kodiak which Electronic Arts wanted to acquire. But EA needed more strength in the management team, especially project management, and a mutual friend introduced us. EA never did complete the acquisition, and Kodiak continued to do work for hire and original IPs.

What was different about working in the US?
Cultural differences were the most obvious. We share the same language, but the pronunciation and meanings of words can be different. I received feedback that I was quite blunt in my delivery of direction and messages. While I think of this as honesty and clarity, and it was never an issue in the UK, it was something I needed to pay attention to. Development, however, is development, no matter where you are in the world. Ultimately, it's all variations on the same themes: clear communication of expectations, accurate measurement and tracking, quality control, rewarding great performance and building high performing teams.

After Kodiak, you joined Midway in 2002, working in its famous sports division.
They had sports experts by the dozen – these were the guys that created *NBA Jam* and *NFL Blitz* for goodness sake – and at the time they had all the major sport licences. But they were struggling to get console games out on an annual cycle. My role was to run the sports business, maintaining their high quality and still get them out in time. The first year after I joined, our percentage of the sports business doubled. These were super-talented developers, many of whom became great friends, they just needed help seeing the big picture among the thousands of tasks, and that, it would seem, is what I'm good at. Then EA Sports noticed that we were taking market share from them, albeit in small chunks, so I joined Tiburon in Florida and managed all third-party development as well as their *NASCAR* and *Tiger Woods* franchises. Learning to work and get results in such a big organisation was a challenge, but I loved it there, and as part of my work we acquired new studios. One of them was in Utah, and I was asked to take over the studio and build it. I also took charge of EA's North Carolina studio, and we worked mostly [on] games as part of EA's collaboration with Hasbro. We created multiple *NERF*, *Monopoly* and *Risk* games, among others, working on Nintendo platforms, console, Facebook and mobile freemium games.

Presumably while you were working in Utah was when you began teaching at the university?
I have always been passionate about developing new talent, and in recent years, about giving back and helping the next generation of developers. During the early years at EA Salt Lake, we helped the university of Utah to create their gaming program, which has gone on to become one of the best game design and development degrees in the world. After I left EA, the university mentioned that their producer track needed focus, and for a couple of years, one evening a week, I taught would-be producers in much the same way I would do if they came to work at one of my studios. It was very rewarding and I got to meet some remarkable new talent and hear the perspective of people new to this industry, of whom the opportunities and challenges are quite different than when I started out almost 40 years ago.

» [ZX Spectrum] One of the finest 8-bit arcade conversions: *Enduro Racer*.

How did you acquire the 'Guv' moniker?
It was bestowed to me by the team at PMC/Crush!. One of my new recruits back then, Martin Carroll, was from London and he got the nickname 'Smoke'. He had the habit of calling me 'Guv', like in *The Sweeney*, and pretty soon everyone was calling me Guv. I've been Guv everywhere I've worked since.

You've been in the industry a long time – what differences do you see in game development today compared to the early days?
In the early days, it was less of an art. We were all learning as we were going along, and mostly got to wear a lot of different hats. For someone like me, who loves lots of things on the go at once, this was ideal. The closest you get to that these days is if you are an indie developer, otherwise your role is tightly defined, and you're more of a specialist. Back then, it wasn't big business – today, it really is, it's mass market entertainment that can draw daily audiences bigger than most TV shows.

How do you look back on your time working in the Eighties?
A blur!

Finally, which time do you look back at most fondly, and what are you up to these days?
Honestly, I've enjoyed it all. I got to work with some brilliant people and have made some life-long friends. I am always most excited about what I'm doing in the present. Today, I do a lot of consulting for different groups. Mostly NDA, but

» [PC] *NERF N-Strike* – bringing the plastic pistols to the screen.

I'm crazy excited about a new company I formed a couple of years ago with friends to create a next-generation teleportation device – yes, think holodeck – which we're knee-deep in development with right now. It's an insane combination of hardware and software that I hope you'll see in shopping malls, arcades, movie theatres and more within the next 18 months.

Sounds intriguing! Thanks for your time, Guv!
You're welcome! I am truly honoured and flattered to be asked about the projects I have had the privilege to be involved with. As a producer/EP/GM, it's not as if I make these games myself, but I get to lead teams of talented people and together we make them. My job has always been to help lead, focus, manage and otherwise guide the projects from inception through the complexities of development, legal, finance and publishing, so that people can enjoy the work of these talented teams. It's on their behalf that I thank you for caring about these projects!

YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

Readers can get involved at www.retrogamer.net/forum

MERMAN: Which unfinished or unreleased game were you most upset about?

I think the biggest missed opportunity was *Soccer Nation*, that would have been a game changer (sorry!). The vision we had for, not just that game, but actually a suite of sports management/arcade sims which provided for the players to be the stars, is much like we're seeing now with esports.

ERIC: What was *Enduro Racer* like as a project?

The Spectrum version was best. Like all the coin-op conversions we undertook at Activision back then, it was a huge technical challenge getting this gorgeous custom coin-op to both look great and feel right on such a basic Z80 platform. But the genius programming abilities of Alan Laird and Ian Morrison (of Giga Games) delivered a remarkable technical achievement that played brilliantly, and gave us our first number one game for a coin-op conversion. Nick Cook did the graphics, which captured the feel of the original. Those guys were so good.

NORTHWAY: Was Atarisoft independent of the US or was there some co-operation/co-ordination?

It was part of the same operation. Atarisoft started life as a means to get more content created for Atari home computers. They had this setup called Apex – the Atari program exchange – where users could submit their own content to be available for other users. These programs, if approved, had to be manufactured, so there was content curation needed, and some great games came out of that (I loved *Eastern Front* and *Dog Daze*!). That was a lot of the original idea behind Atarisoft. By 1983, a lot of games for non-Atari home computers, especially in Europe, were rip-offs of Atari's coin-op games. So Atarisoft moved into making Atari IP – mostly the coin-op IP – for non-Atari systems. That is what the Atarisoft I joined in the UK was engaged in.

Action Man: Robot Atak

NOT JUST FOR KIDS

RETRO REVIVAL

» GAME BOY ADVANCE » 2004 » MAGIC POCKETS

If there's one thing I love about my hobby it's the discovery of the new. I love stumbling across titles that I've never heard of before, and I enjoy it even more when the game in question turns out to be a good one.

I was completely unaware of Magic Pockets before buying *Action Man: Robot Atak*, but it turns out that it's a pretty prolific French games developer with an extensive number of licensed games under its belt, ranging from *Extreme Ghostbusters* on Game Boy Color to *Cartoon Network: Battle Crashers* on 3DS. Based on the strength of *Robot Atak*, I may have to investigate its library in more depth.

If you've never heard of *Robot Atak* before, you're probably equally unaware of the 2004 direct-to-DVD CGI film it's based on (handily it's included with the game). Initially you take control of Action Man who is handy with his fists and any firearms he can get his hands on. Later levels introduce Redwolf, a stereotypical bow-wielding Native American, Flynt, a stereotypical tech guy and Kongo, a stereotypical gorilla. While early stages start off quite conventionally, they soon start opening up as you journey deeper into the HQ of the evil No-Face and that's when *Robot Atak*'s true colours shine through.

One stage features Action Man tearing across the landscape on an armed motorcycle, another has him take to the skies and shooting down flying dinosaurs and strategically placed mines. Redwolf has to navigate labyrinth-like constructions, using his bow to access new areas, while Flynt has several Mode 7-styled stages where he races into the screen and has to collect coins and take out incoming enemies.

You're constantly thrown curveballs to keep you on your toes and the variety is welcoming. We'd imagine it's structured like this to grab the attention of youngsters, but it worked equally well on me as well. Polished far beyond what you'd expect for a GBA game aimed at kids, *Robot Atak*'s crowning glory for me is an early boss battle that pits you against a ferocious T-Rex, which you can hit in the face. Yes, hit in the face! Needless to say, this is permanently staying in my collection.

>> This month we spend some time with Nintendo's new Game & Watch, find out if Dirt 5 plays as good as it looks and have some new retro books to enjoy

» The presentation of Nintendo's new system is exceptional. It's clearly a love letter to the popular series.

Game & Watch: Super Mario Bros

NINTENDO CELEBRATES MARIO'S 35TH WITH STYLE

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- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £49.99
- **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO
- **DEVELOPER:** NINTENDO
- **PLAYERS:** 1

»[Game & Watch] *Super Mario Bros 2* is still brutally tough, so expect those buttons to take a pounding.

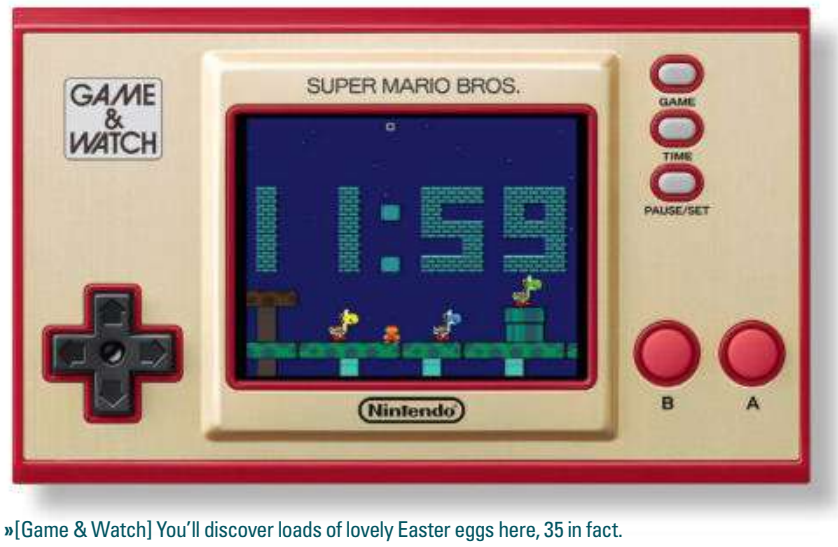
It's obvious that a great deal of thought and attention has gone into this micro version of the classic NES game. Take the packaging for example. The box art and style dutifully mimics the old Game & Watch boxes of old, but a clear plastic sleeve has been added with a *Super Mario Bros* skin that will instantly grab those that loved the Italian plumber's first super-sized adventure.

That same care and attention has also been lavished on the actual system, which looks incredibly authentic and could easily be mistaken for part of the original Game & Watch range (with the screen turned off at least). The system itself merges two Nintendo hardware brands perfectly. The front has a lovely golden brushed metal finish reminiscent of earlier Game & Watch systems, and includes the same excellent d-pad and spongy buttons that the earlier models had, as well as three smaller option buttons which are devoted to 'Game', 'Time' and 'Pause/Set'.

The red chassis on the other hand is a clear tribute to Nintendo's 8-bit console and the end result is a rather gorgeous looking device. The only thing we did notice is there's no kickstand on the back of the system that many earlier Game & Watches had.

While it lacks a stand, the system's 2.5 inch screen certainly makes up for the omission. It feels incredibly crisp and detailed and does a great job of showing off the three included games. Colours are nice and vibrant on the NES titles, while the new rendition of the first Game & Watch release makes an admirable attempt at mimicking the look of the original LCD screens. The end result is that this new Game & Watch is a lovely addition to the series, which has made us hungry for more. There are a few caveats of course, but we'll cover those a little later.

Aside from a modern new screen, the other main difference that separates this new Game & Watch from earlier ones is that it actually



»[Game & Watch] You'll discover loads of lovely Easter eggs here, 35 in fact.

BRIEF HISTORY

» The Game & Watch series was dreamt up by the late Gunpei Yokoi and began with the 1980 release, *Ball*. The series of handhelds slowly evolved over time, adding an alarm in later models and sometimes supporting two screens to enhance the action. The very last release, *Mario The Juggler*, came out in 1991. Interestingly, a Game & Watch version of *Ball* was released in 2010 via Club Nintendo to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the system.

»[Game & Watch] The system uses a USB-C cable for charging purposes, although there's no headphone jack.

✱ PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

Mortal Kombat 11 Ultimate

Not only are there two fantastic stories to enjoy, but you can use Rambo to rip the Joker's throat out. There's a sentence I thought I'd never write.

NICK

Dirt 5

It's been far too long since I had a really good arcade racer to sink my teeth into, so this has arrived at the perfect time.

»[Game & Watch] As great as this Game & Watch is, we would have preferred more games.

»[Game & Watch] *Ball* is simple, but fun and now features Mario doing the juggling.

WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD

GAME & WATCH: DONKEY KONG

▼ SOMETHING NEW

GAME GEAR MICRO

»Those with larger hands may struggle with the small size of Nintendo's new system.

features three games: *Super Mario Bros*, *Super Mario Bros 2 (The Lost Levels)* and a new version of the first Game & Watch release, *Ball*, featuring Mario instead of the original character. All three titles are reached by hitting the 'Game' button and progress is instantly saved if you put the machine into sleep mode or switch over to another game. The emulation on all three games seems excellent, with *Ball* being a particular delight.

We won't go into too much detail with the games, as they're titles that many should be familiar with. *Super Mario Bros* remains an excellent platformer and *The Lost Levels* remains a fiendishly difficult upgrade that some may find slightly tougher due to how close the A and B buttons are. *Ball* is obviously a far more sedate affair with Mario attempting to keep balls in the air for as long as possible, with the A game giving him two balls to keep afloat and the B game adding a third into the mix. Yes it's simple, but it remains a diverting time-waster and we've put quite a lot of time into getting high scores.

All three games can be instantly paused using the 'Pause/Set' button, but that button has other purposes. Any game in progress can be instantly reset and there are options for sound and brightness, too. We didn't notice any sound distortion coming from the included mono speaker, even on the very loudest setting. The screen itself can look a little washed out on full brightness, but it's certainly not terrible (although we preferred having it at the default setting). Pushing both sound and brightness to max will impact on the system's battery life which is around the eight-hour mark.

The final option button is dedicated to the watch aspect of the system and this too has been put together with a lot of thought, and features Mario running across different animated backgrounds, with the time being represented by the game's familiar blocks. There are 35 secrets to discover in this mode, and while many of them are throwaway gimmicks, they're still nice to uncover. It's also funny seeing goombas getting stuck in certain numbers and then stacking on each other until they can finally drop to the floor. It adds absolutely nothing, but is still humorous to see.

As great as Nintendo's tribute to *Super Mario Bros* is, it's not quite perfect. The small size of the device will mean that some may have issues playing it for longer stretches, while the sponginess of the buttons was also a little off-putting at times. Another thing we have an issue with is the paltry number of games (we'd have preferred all four NES *Mario* games and a few more Game & Watch ones) and the overall price, which feels a little too much at £50. The NES games also look slightly soft due to not running at their native resolutions, but the screen is so small it's not that much of an issue.

While it's disappointing that so few games are included on this Game & Watch there's no denying it's a lovely piece of kit that does both the *Super Mario Bros* and Game & Watch heritages proud. If you can justify the asking price you're unlikely to be disappointed with your purchase. ✱

In a nutshell

It absolutely needs more games to justify the asking price, but it's hard to argue with the quality and effort that has gone into celebrating Mario's 35th birthday.

PICK OF THE MONTH

»A sticker of Princess Daphne is included, which you can add to the machine's base, if you so desire.

Dragon's Lair X Replicade

» **Buy it from:** Newwavetoys.com » **Buy it for:** $119.99

The latest miniature cabinet from New Wave Toys highlights just how far the company will go to recreate the arcade experience of old. Its new 12 inch *Dragon's Lair* cabinet not only contains the standard scaled quarters that feature with all its cabs, but also adds a miniaturised LaserDisc player, a remote and even a tiny laserdisc. Of course, they do absolutely nothing at all, but they do serve to prove just how intent New Wave Toys is when it comes to transporting you back to the good old days.

We've seen a fair few miniature licensed arcade cabs now and *Dragon's Lair* is one of the loveliest we've looked at. Crafted from wood, metal and plastic, it feels solid and exceptionally well made, and includes numerous lovely touches like a marquee that you can light up, as well as fully functional scoreboard displays. The back of the cab houses the power switch, two USB ports for compatible joypads (we couldn't get our Xbox 360 pad to work) a volume control, charge port and a HDMI out, which allows you to play the game on a big screen. Playing this way was slightly disappointing as the 720p display did look a little soft and fuzzy, but it remains a nice option to include.

»This non-working LaserDisc player can be found housed in the back of the cabinet.

You're better off simply playing it on the cabinet as the included 4:3, 4.2 inch screen looks absolutely lovely, delivering a nice sharp image that does a great job of showing off Don Bluth's incredible artwork. The emulation itself is also very good and we didn't spot anything unusual in the several hours we spent with the cabinet. It sounds ace as well, with the included speakers throwing out a surprising amount of sound with no noticeable distortion on full volume.

If we have one complaint about the cab, it is that it feels a little cramped to play compared to the slightly bigger size of the Quarter Arcades range. Custom charges from the States also need to be considered, as we couldn't find a UK distributor. For many though it will be worth it, as New Wave Toys' machine is a miniature work of art.

Missile Commander

» **Buy it from:** amazon.co.uk » **Buy it for:** £22.44

If you've ever listened to *The Ted Dabney Experience* podcast Tony Temple hosts with Richard May and our own Paul Drury, you'll understand just how much Atari's game means to him. Tony comes across in his podcast as being incredibly down-to-earth and extremely honest, which means that *Missile Commander: A Journey To The Top Of An Arcade Classic*, becomes a very engaging read, with Tony mentioning everything from the validity of Twin Galaxies scores, the hate mail he's received, as well as the creation of the game – from design to finished cabinet – that he clearly loves so much. The end result is a genuinely fascinating read that highlights just what it takes to become a world champion.

Dirt 5

» **System:** Xbox One (Tested), Xbox Series S/X, PS4, PS5, PC » **Buy it from:** Online » **Buy it for:** £44.99+

This entry in the long-running rally series has fully embraced the arcade style of racing, and many of the best aspects of that are here, with big jumps, boisterous rivals and a tremendous sense of speed. The career mode isn't as varied as Codemasters would like you to believe, as many of the event types are simply standard races on different terrain, but the actual racing is entertaining enough to sustain it and the structure is considered – race goals ensure that you have to do more than simply win to progress, and the branching event unlocks ensure that you'll rarely be stuck. Playgrounds and online racing will provide long term value, too. Unfortunately we encountered a few bugs, which dragged the experience down a bit.

>> Score **78%**

Game Boy: The Box Art Collection

» **Buy it from:** bitmapbooks.co.uk
» **Buy it for:** £29.99 (hardback), £49.99 (Silver Edition)

The latest tome from Bitmap Books builds on its earlier *Super Famicom: The Box Art Collection* by adding six screenshots of every featured Game Boy game. The downside is that their relatively small size makes it hard to appreciate the lovely artwork that went into many of the system's games. It's otherwise business as usual, meaning you get some truly stunning photography from some of the best Game Boy collections in the world, some nice insight into the handheld's history and a small overview of each featured game. Sadly it lacks the developer anecdotes found in Bitmap's *A Visual Compendium* series, meaning there's not much substance to go along with all that gorgeous photography. Definitely one for Game Boy aficionados.

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» Its price drew criticism on release, but the Capcom Home Arcade remains the only official way to play *Aliens Vs Predator.*

MINI CONSOLES

Team RG discuss these cool miniature machines

DARRAN JONES

NICK THORPE

DREW SLEEP

While it certainly wasn't the first to market, the NES Classic did open up the floodgates and highlighted that there was a hungry market for miniature consoles that came loaded with your favourite games. Four years on, we take a look at how the market now stands and our system highlights of the last year.

DARRAN: It's been another good year for Mini consoles hasn't it?

NICK: I'd say so, the PC Engine Mini delivered, I love my Game Gear Micros and the Game & Watch looks great. If the Astro City Mini is as good as it looks, all the better.

DARRAN: The only system that's let the side down is the new Game & Watch and that's only due to the number of games on it. It's a lovely piece of kit to use.

DREW: It's actually quite remarkable how this new Mini market has exploded.

DARRAN: Absolutely. But it's easy to see why. We're all suckers for nostalgia.

NICK: Also, Nintendo entering the field four years ago did really help to get Mini consoles taken more seriously.

DARRAN: Well let's be honest, it set a solid standard for others to follow. Although not everyone did that. Did they Sony…

NICK: Haha, yeah. The PlayStation Classic could have been a monster hit, and it's a shame that it wasn't.

DREW: I remember the *Mr Driller* and *Destruction Derby* deadline well…

DARRAN: I think I bought one for my cousin for £16 new, which says everything you need to know about its desirability.

NICK: It's interesting that you can use price to gauge that. The Mega Drive Mini held up pretty well and I think the PC Engine Mini is going for more than RRP in CeX.

DREW: I'm still sad we didn't get the white one over here, but I totally understand why. And you can import if you're that keen.

NICK: Speaking of importing, how maddening is it that we're not getting the Astro City Mini? They could easily sell that worldwide.

DARRAN: Even though it's not really a Mini, it's also worth mentioning the updated C64 that was released this year.

NICK: My dad had a nostalgia attack when he saw that in my flat the other day. Retro Games did a great job with the new joystick and the full-sized keyboard.

DARRAN: Here's something. Has playing a game on a Mini system convinced you to buy an original version yet?

DREW: The opposite happened to me, actually. I have a SNES Mini, which has all I want from the console on it, so it's saved me quite a lot of money!

NICK: I haven't done it yet, but the PC Engine Mini has definitely convinced me that I need to pick up *Be Ball*, the Japanese version of *Chew Man Fu*.

DARRAN: I think the high prices of a lot of games really work in these systems' favour. You can save a fortune.

NICK: I'm looking forward to the Amiga Mini just because it'll save me money on real hardware and half-dead floppy disks.

DARRAN: I'm interested to see how this rumoured Amiga system is going to work, as systems like

» Drew's thankful he never got to experience text adventures on the ZX Spectrum Vega. They weren't fun.

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

» [NES Classic] A great selection of first party and licensed games helped the NES Classic to greatness.

» The NES Classic was a big success and proved just how popular Mini consoles could be.

» We were big fans of the Neo Geo Mini, but the HDMI output did let it down somewhat.

» [Mega Drive Mini] Exclusive games like this new *Darius* port made M2's miniature system very desirable.

» [SNES Classic] Some Mini consoles add cool quality of life enhancements like the ability to rewind or save at any time.

the Vega highlight the difficulties of games requiring multiple function keys beyond the standard controls. Virtual keyboards. Yuck. They are flipping rubbish.

DREW: I like how Nintendo popped an unreleased *Star Fox* game on the SNES Mini. I'd like to see more flourishes like that wherever possible.

NICK: I do love those extra touches, like *Monster World IV* in English on the Mega Drive Mini. Once again, another example of Nintendo leading and the competition stepping up to match them, which is why it's kind of frustrating that the company seems less interested in Mini consoles now.

DARRAN: Never say never. There's no way it won't release an N64 model at some point. Although is Nintendo brave enough to release one without *GoldenEye* on it?

DREW: Do it. *GoldenEye* is overrated. Fight me!

NICK: I'd jump through those licensing hoops, because the PlayStation Classic showed us what happens when licensing concerns get in the way of an ideal selection of games.

DARRAN: Good licensing really makes these systems as far as I'm concerned. So let's hope companies continue to keep it in mind for the future.

» The original C64 Mini wasn't perfect on launch, but it was greatly improved with a later full-sized model.

READERS REACT

What's your favourite Mini console?

Javier82
The SNES Classic, duh! I mean, it's the best console ever in the best form factor ever. It missed some games, but it can be solved through tinkering. Also, it has *Star Fox 2*. Special mention to the Neo Geo Arcade Mini.

Mark Boreham
C64 Mini, because it could herald the possibility of seeing an Amiga Mini.

IPlaySEGA
Mega Drive Mini, because I prefer playing *Monster World IV* with a MD controller instead of PS360 controllers.

Nights of gaming
Raspberry Pi, someone has to say it.

Batmangroot
The SNES Classic, because it has a mind-blowing selection of games!

Matthew Reynolds
The PC Engine Mini has some really great games you can't easily get elsewhere, has regional variants of the titles, great emulation and some nice touches like variations between cartridge and disc!

Dr_Kung
I was fond of the idea of getting the SNES Mini as it is the most appealing with its library of great games, but I'm not paying scalper prices for one.

Curtis Richardson
SNES Mini. Its game library is outstanding and its controller is much nicer than the NES Mini's.

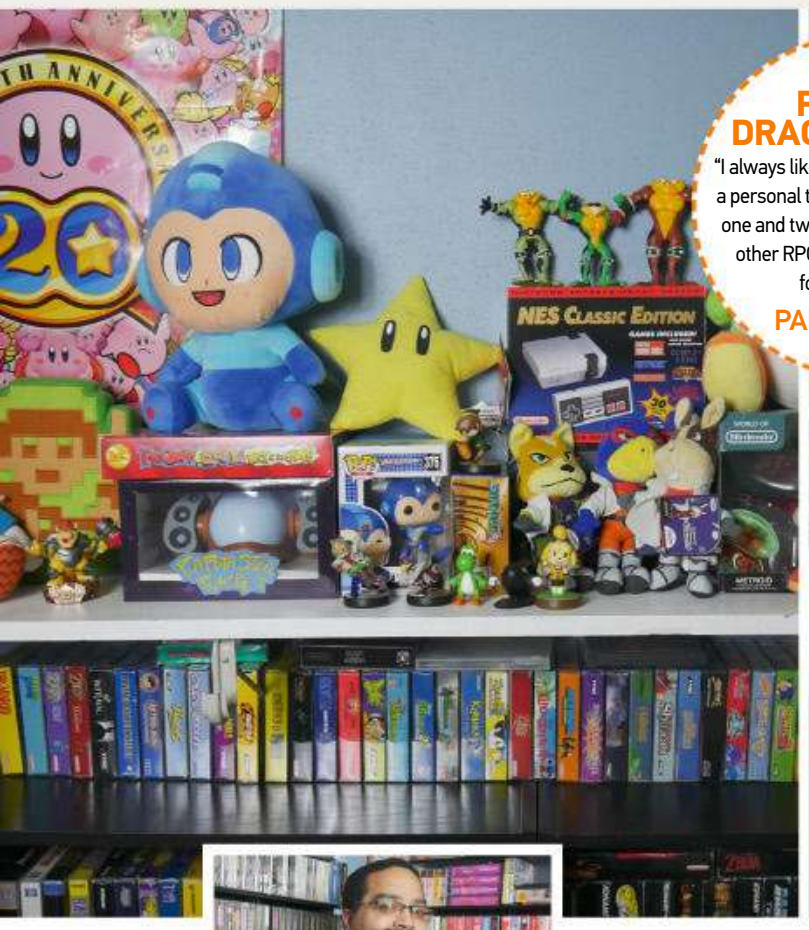
Simon Boggy Burton
C64 Mini. A nice interface, ability to add loads more games and a decent joystick with the newer batch.

Daniel Slater
PC Engine, as I never had the chance to pick one up as a kid.

Luka Belica
Definitely the Sega Mega Drive Mini. It's packed with quality games and quality emulation. SNES eat your heart out...

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**



PANZER DRAGOON SAGA

"I always like to trade, especially if it's a personal trade. I traded my *Lunar*s one and two for Sega CD, and many other RPGs that he was looking for specifically."

PAID: TRADED

MUSHA

"It was about ten years ago, I got *MUSHA* from Game Over Games. It was 70 bucks, complete in box, mint."

PAID: $70

ON TO THE NEXT LEVEL

George 'G' Gracin's love for Sega is obvious when you see his Genesis collection

If you're looking at the photos on this page and thinking to yourself "blimey, that's a lot of Genesis games", you're more right than you could know. It's not just a lot of them – George Gracin, better known simply as G, has every game released for Sega's 16-bit system in the USA.

G's love of gaming began at a local bowling alley, as his parents competed as part of a league. "In between rounds, my dad and I would play games in that bowling alley," he remembers. "I'm pretty sure they must have had some kind of contract with Sega, because they had all the big Sega arcade games – they had *After Burner*, they had *Space Harrier*, they had *Out Run* and *Altered Beast*. But there was one game in particular that I remember being the very first one that I ever played with him and that was *Vanguard*, the basic multi-perspective shooter. Our very first console that we got was the Atari 2600, and the first game that my dad bought for us was *Vanguard*."

Between high school and college, G found himself working at FuncoLand, a videogame retailer. "I was there during the transition between 16-bit and 32-bit, and I was already in love with the Sega Genesis." With the 3D consoles coming in, the store began to clear its stocks of Genesis, SNES and even NES games. "That was when I realised 'I'm going to start collecting as many of these games as I can, because these games are cheap'. We're talking complete in box, these games were cheap – three bucks, five bucks, ten bucks."

By now G was actively collecting, but he hadn't quite decided on a goal yet. "As the collection started building, as I started getting older and started getting more and more into my love of gaming, I realised 'I'm going to hang on to this'. Nintendo and PlayStation I would sell and trade, but one thing that was always consistent was Sega. I hardly ever trade and sell Sega, even today." Having noticed that pattern, G's goal was clarified. "Later in my years, I realised I kind of wanted to do this YouTube thing, and I was also writing blogs for various websites, and that's when I realised 'you know what, I'm going to go for a full set, because I'm not too terribly far'. I was very thankful that I got most of the heavy hitters early like *MUSHA*, *Mega Turrican* and *Crusader Of Centy*. This was a journey that culminated over ten, maybe even fifteen years – only just a few years ago did I complete the collection, and it was an amazing feeling when that happened."

As well as collecting games, G runs his own YouTube channel, G To The Next Level. "I was really spinning my wheels – I was like 'I don't know how to do this, I don't know how to stage, I don't know how to edit, how can I really get started?.'" While researching this, G met Tyler of My Retro Life – previously iretrogamer – and after a nervy but successful initial collaboration, G co-hosted on iretrogamer for a year or so before establishing his own channel, a variety retro gaming show.

As with most collectors, G is always looking for certain particular items, including *Little Samson* for the NES, *Haunting Ground* for PS2 and a Neo Geo AES. "There is one system I still have a huge tie for, and that's the Sega Saturn. I still want to go for a full set," he adds. "I know there are still some heavy hitters on there that I still want – *Mega Man 8*, *Mega Man X4*, *Lunacy*, *Batman Forever*. Thankfully, like the Genesis I've got most of the heavy hitters out of the way – *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, *Burning Rangers*, *House Of The Dead*." To see whether he manages it, check out his channel at youtube.com/c/GtotheNextLevel.

BIO

NAME:
George 'G' Gracin

LOCATION:
Houston, Texas, USA

FAVOURITE GAME:
Streets Of Rage II

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Genesis, PlayStation, Xbox 360, NES

TWITTER:
@GtoTheNextLevel

MAGIC KNIGHT RAYEARTH

"A friend bought this for me for Christmas a few years ago, complete in box – no creases, no scratches, mint. It is the Fuu disc, so it's kind of the least rare of the three."

PAID: GIFT

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

CRUSADER OF CENTY

"I remember getting this when I worked at FuncoLand, back in 1996 I believe. It was loose at the time, but over time I've gotten the manual and hint book for it."

PAID: $20

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

KEIO FLYING SQUADRON

■ "It's one that I'd wanted ever since I was a kid, but I didn't have a Sega CD when I was a kid. I remember that day distinctly – it was the last day at my old job. The people that worked there were awesome people that were looking out for me, and they were like 'hey, we remember you talking about this, do you need it?'. I had a wall of PlayStation games that was just kind of sitting there, and I bought a box of those, Game Boy Advance games and other random games."

PAID: $550 IN TRADE

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE GOLD STANDARD

NEO GEO AES

If you want to get your hands on SNK's powerhouse, it'll set you back a fair bit of cash. Unboxed consoles start from about **£220** and boxed ones from **£350**, but bear in mind that various factors such as BIOS mods and low serial numbers can affect the price. Also, it's worth bearing in mind that the AES itself won't break the bank, but picking up the most desirable cartridges can set you back just as much as the console itself, if not even more.

ENTER THE MATRIX

Those of you hankering for some slightly dodgy licensed action won't have to spend much to pick up *Enter The Matrix* – all three console versions can be had for **£5** or less, and as little as **£1** if you're patient. The PC version is also cheap, but it's worth noting that the CD-ROM versions are far more common than DVD versions.

SABRE WULF

It's not always easy to predict Game Boy Advance prices, in part due to their cardboard packaging and also due to the apparent Nintendo premium that games attract. Still, **£11.50** for a complete boxed copy of this seems pretty good, as plenty of cart-only copies have shifted for a similar price. As always, beware of bootlegs on this system.

ALFRED CHICKEN

If you want the original Game Boy version of this platformer, values don't seem to be fixed. A recent Buy It Now listing on eBay saw the game sell for **£14.99** complete, but it seems the seller could have got more – an open auction the next day attracted 16 bids and ended at **£31**. With volatile pricing, be ready to pounce.

WIZBALL

On the C64, we've seen *Wizball* sell for as little as **£2.20** and as much as **£14.99** in its Hit Squad version, with the original release hovering around **£10.** Amstrad copies range from **£2.20** to **£5,** and the Amiga version recently sold for **£13.** Sellers are asking **£20+** for Atari ST versions, and **£8+** on the ZX Spectrum, but patience may pay off.

HOW MUCH?!

MAGICAL DROP III

A Japanese Neo Geo AES copy of Data East's excellent puzzle game recently sold for **$2,001** – almost **£1,500!** On any other system that would be pretty outrageous, but that's the reality of collecting Neo Geo home cartridges. For comparison, the MVS version is less than a tenth of that price, the Japanese Saturn version can be had for under **£20** and a PAL PlayStation copy will set you back less than **£10** with some patience.

Prices correct at time of print

MY RETRO LIFE

PERSONAL STORIES ABOUT OUR **SHARED PASSION**

A WRITER'S JOURNEY

Retro Gamer freelancer Graeme Mason takes us through his very personal collection

To paraphrase Ray Liotta in *Goodfellas*, as far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a writer. When I finally achieved this ambition ten years ago, and received my first paid commission thanks to the editor of this very fine magazine, I bought a memento from eBay. The ZX Spectrum game, *Splat!*, representing my first feature for **Retro Gamer** (a six-page archive on its publisher, Incentive Software) became the first game to sit on my retro shelf, as it was back then. Today, it's a whole retro bookcase, stuffed to each side with games that I've written about. It's my pride and joy.

There are few avenues of collecting that seem to attract the fervour and dedication of videogame collectors. I am always amazed at the vast sums of money that pass hands, and the perseverance in finding that one game with a slightly different cover to the norm. My 'normal' collection consists of a few random bits and bobs from various systems, culminating in an assembly of ZX Spectrum games that stands just shy of 1,000 individual titles. But these are stacked away in clear plastic boxes inside my garage, hidden from view and unseen to the world, except when I pull out some random game in order to show my boys just how tough games really used to be.

It's a bit different for the display shown here. Visitors, friends and family can see it easily, and there's always something there that someone remembers playing when they were a kid. At the time of *Splat!*, I was renting a room while I gathered the funds to buy a house, and the Incentive game was soon joined by more boxes as the idea caught on. At this early stage, I also featured games that I'd written about on my blog, then website. Today, as space becomes a premium, all these are gone, banished to the garage.

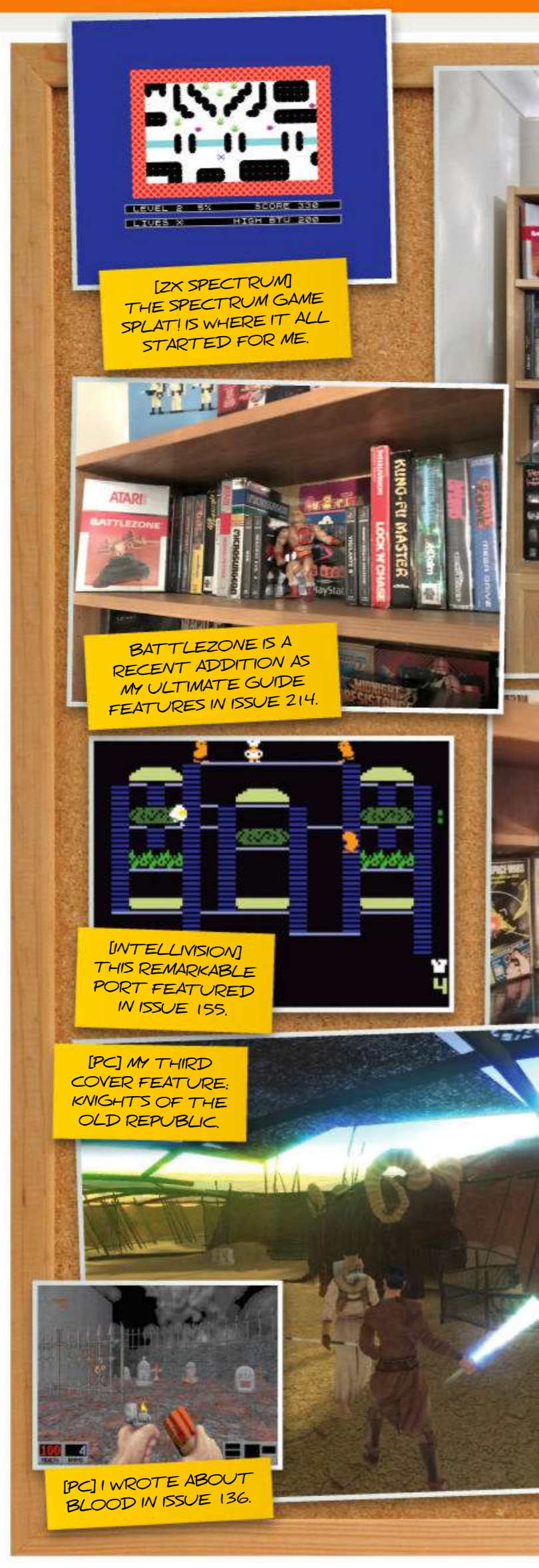
Eventually, when I got my own place, Ikea came to the rescue with the oak wood style shelves and cupboard you can see here. As I continued to write for **Retro Gamer** and the retro section of *games™*, games were added each month. Some, such as big box originals of *Warcraft* and *Blood*, were too expensive to obtain, and I opted for a re-release or jewel case. Others, such as the cute and funny game of life, *Jones In The Fast Lane*, simply proved impossible to buy. I was overjoyed when I finally secured it, albeit only the jewel case and disc.

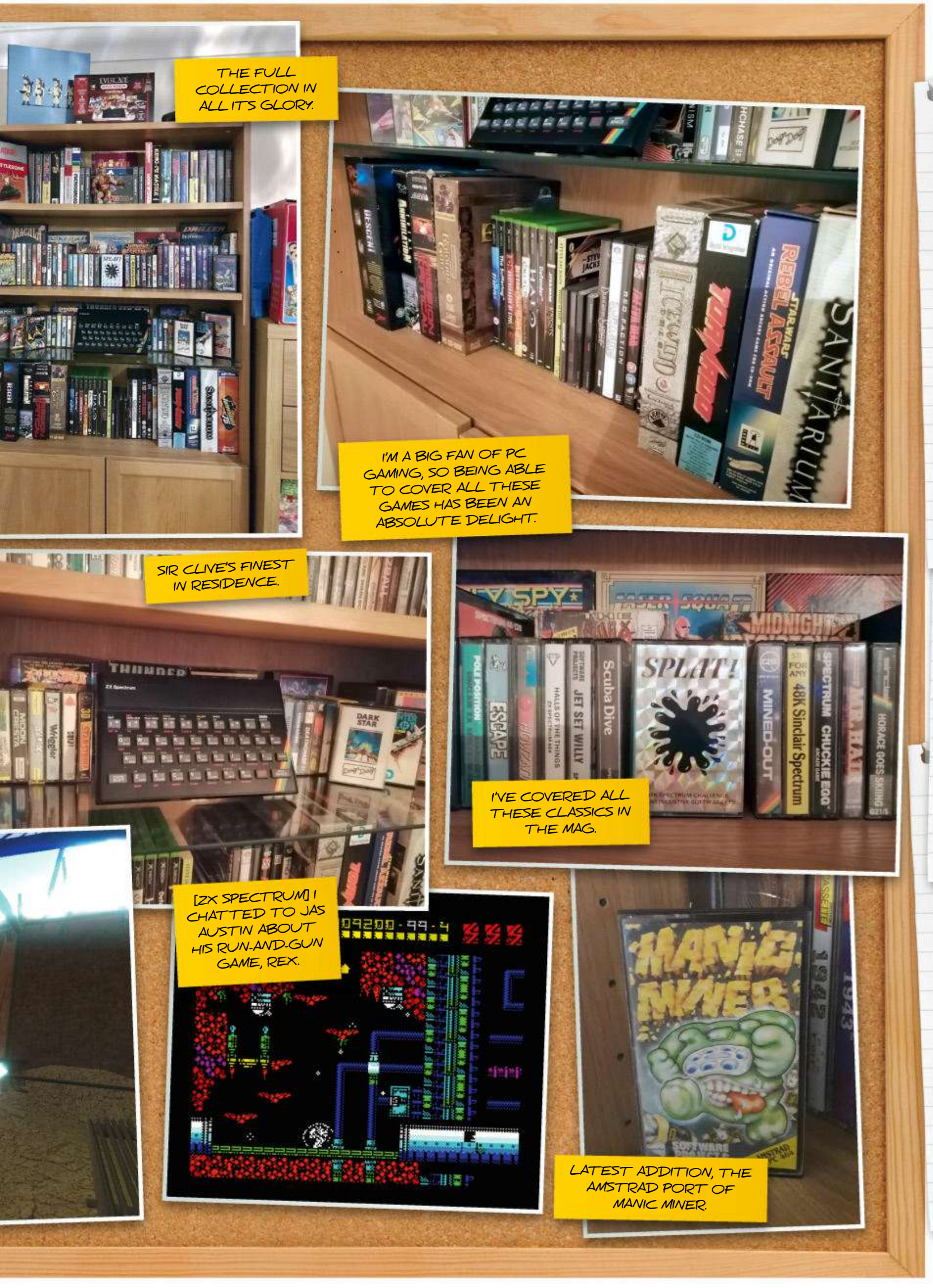
Those big PC game boxes remain my favourites, despite their ridiculous nature. I grew up in the Seventies and Eighties, thus discovered videogames via the arcades and those large plastic table top consoles sold by Tomy and Grandstand. My first console proper was a Mattel Intellivision, and I've still no idea to this day why my parents bought me it. As a ten-year-old lad, I never had enough money to buy games, and they were virtually impossible to find anyway, save by mail order. And then, one fateful day in 1983, a friend brought round his shiny new 48K ZX Spectrum. He only had two games – Melbourne House's *Scramble* clone, *Penetrator* and Ultimate's *Atic Atac* – but as you can probably imagine, that did us for most of the day. When I finally got my own ZX Spectrum for Christmas 1984, it was a whole new world, and that sufficed for me until the early Nineties when I finally found gainful employment, purchasing a Sega Mega Drive with my first pay cheque. It came with *Mega Games Two*, *Mega Games Three* and *Strider*. Darran would approve [I do – Ed].

As the Mega Drive gave way to the Sony PlayStation in the mid-Nineties, I became a PC owner, modifying my rig, as we all did back then, and poring over the pages of mags such as *PC Gamer*. When it came to which games I wanted to write about, these were at the forefront, along with a band of all those games I played on my Spectrum and Mega Drive. These fabulous big boxes all occupy the lower display shelf, as that's the only part where they can stand vertically. Someone once told me that games should always be stacked vertically – I assumed it was for ease of access, but I prefer the way it looks anyway.

After adding a mint condition 48k Spectrum to the central shelf (it doesn't work, so it's a perfect display model), games for the Sinclair computer radiate out from this wonderful machine. Below it sit the handful of Xbox games I've written about – most notably, *Call Of Cthulhu: Dark Corners Of The Earth*, the newest game that I've had featured in **Retro Gamer**, coming out in 2004 – only 16 years ago! On the top shelf there are the eras either side of 8-bit with my Mega Drive and Atari VCS/Intellivision games. Then, above the Spectrum rests the silver-foiled *Splat!*, taking pride of place as the game where it all started. Recent articles usually occupy the corners to the left for a short time, before retiring, spine-out, as games come in to replace them. I love adding gems to my collection, and with each one holding a special significance for me personally, there's hopefully plenty more candidates to join the 100-plus games. It's getting a bit crowded though – I think another trip to Ikea may be in order soon…

I regularly post images of my display together with new additions on social media. You can follow me on Instagram *(@jdanddiet)*, Twitter *(@wizwords)*, *www.wizwords.net* and Facebook *(www.facebook.com/wizwords)*.


[ZX SPECTRUM] THE SPECTRUM GAME SPLAT! IS WHERE IT ALL STARTED FOR ME.
BATTLEZONE IS A RECENT ADDITION AS MY ULTIMATE GUIDE FEATURES IN ISSUE 214.
[INTELLIVISION] THIS REMARKABLE PORT FEATURED IN ISSUE 155.
[PC] MY THIRD COVER FEATURE: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC.
[PC] I WROTE ABOUT BLOOD IN ISSUE 136.


THE FULL COLLECTION IN ALL IT'S GLORY.
I'M A BIG FAN OF PC GAMING, SO BEING ABLE TO COVER ALL THESE GAMES HAS BEEN AN ABSOLUTE DELIGHT.
SIR CLIVE'S FINEST IN RESIDENCE.
I'VE COVERED ALL THESE CLASSICS IN THE MAG.
[ZX SPECTRUM] I CHATTED TO JAS AUSTIN ABOUT HIS RUN-AND-GUN GAME, REX.
LATEST ADDITION, THE AMSTRAD PORT OF MANIC MINER.

ALWAYS MEET YOUR HEROES

ONE OF THE BEST THINGS ABOUT WRITING FOR RETRO GAMER IS MEETING THE PEOPLE WHO MADE THE GAMES I LOVED AS A KID

In The Chair Jim Bagley – Retro Gamer 124
Represented by: *Gutz*

I drove from Essex to The Wirral and back in one day to meet Jim, and it was worth every drop of diesel. We talked for hours in a pub about Jim's career and many of his brilliant games that I played as a kid.

The History Of Baldur's Gate – Retro Gamer 188
Represented by: *Baldur's Gate*

No driving this time, but a long-distance Skype call with James Ohlen, BioWare's lead designer of *Baldur's Gate*. James was a brilliant interviewee, but our chat almost didn't happen thanks to one of Texas' infamous electrical storms.

From The Archives Martech Games – Retro Gamer 133
Represented by: *Nemesis The Warlock*

Trumping even the trip to The Wirral, one summery day I drove down to Barnstaple to meet Martech's founder, David Martin. It was another illuminating interview, and David kindly bought me lunch! A 504 mile round trip.

In The Chair Pete Cooke – Retro Gamer 126
Represented by: *Tau Ceti*

My destination this time was Leicester, and the elusive master coder Pete Cooke. Pete doesn't give many interviews, so this was an honour – and he's a lovely guy, too.

From The Archives Digital Integration – Retro Gamer 108
Represented by: *Fighter Pilot*

Interviewing David Marshall about the software house he co-founded was an absolute delight, and just a short trip to Farnborough, Hampshire. Sadly, David died in March 2016 – I feel honoured I got to meet the great man.

The Making of Rex – Retro Gamer 112
Represented by: *Rex*

A three-hour drive to the south coast and back this time, and Portsmouth resident Jas Austin, the man behind Speccy run-and-gun game, *Rex*. Another great three hours of retro chat.

MAILBAG

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Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of either our NES/Master System or SNES/Mega Drive books

STAR LETTER

THANKS FROM THE USA

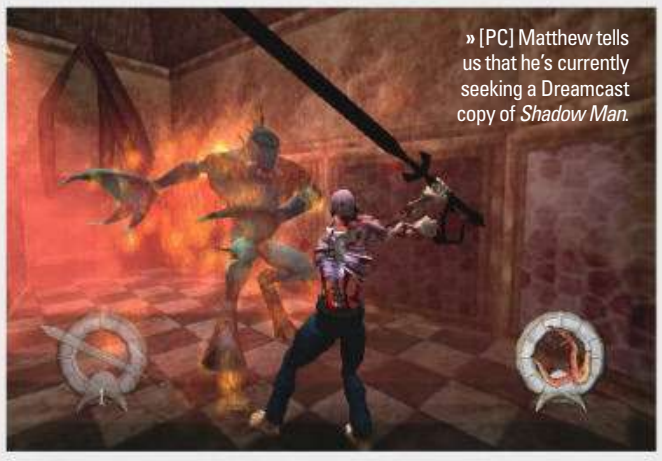
Hello,
I am a reader from the USA, I've subscribed for two to three years now (give or take) and have read the magazine for about four years total. I absolutely love learning about gaming history and have since I got my first Atari 2600 at the age of 12 (I'm now 37).

I have worked in hospitals continuously for the past 15 years, and I have been with my current employer for over seven years now. My orientation class I was in had 15 new employees counting myself in November 2013, two of my classmates have now passed from COVID-19, as well as another friend I made while working here. In addition to this, I watched 29 patients pass away from COVID-19 as well. And this all happened so quickly, in two months mostly (March and April).

It was hard to type the prior paragraph, but there was a reason for it. Every time I found myself on the verge of a hysterical, tearful, nervous breakdown of sorts, due to a recent death, I always found myself re-reading old issues at work on break, at home, wherever. My old collectible issues I purchased (like the **Retro Gamer** Atari guide, for example) and visiting your website has really helped me keep it together. I have just finished issues 207 and 210. Reading about how other gamers/collectors and your staff are coping with this has really helped as well. I've been self-isolating since late February and have never felt so alone. Typically, my friend Art and I would go to Robot City Arcade in Binghamton, NY, USA, every other weekend. Plus, I was normally fortunate enough to make one or two trips to Funspot each year. Not being able to do that and see friends or family has been incredibly depressing at times.

Recent vaccine news and a more mature administration over here, plus having a decent backlog of issues now, has perked up my spirit quite a bit and I personally want to thank everyone for their writings this past year. It has honestly helped myself and probably many of us readers, an incredible amount.
Matthew Yakubik

We're so sorry to learn about what you've been through this year, and it means a lot to us to learn that our magazine has helped you through these tough times. You and so many other front line workers have been doing so much to keep us safe – on behalf of the entire team, thank you Matthew.



» [PC] Matthew tells us that he's currently seeking a Dreamcast copy of *Shadow Man*.

» [ZX Spectrum] Martyn Carroll's ZX Spectrum Next feature in issue 203 revealed *Driller* receives a suitable boost in performance, so give that a try.

» [ZX Spectrum] As for *Jetpac*, well, we just love ourselves a good game of *Jetpac*.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Hi **Retro Gamer,**
I managed to snag a ZX Spectrum Next on a recent sale on their website. The wait is going to be agonising! I haven't ever really spent a lot of time with the ZX Spectrum and so I am excited to get to grips with a new machine. The fact that it can play ZX Spectrum games overclocked means that many of the games that may have felt a tad sluggish by today's standards may in fact now play much smoother. What would you recommend I dive into first as something of a Speccy newbie?
Chris Cheeseman

If you're keen on overclocking, we'd certainly recommend trying out the different 3D Freescape games, as Martyn Carroll revealed that *Driller* was greatly improved in issue 203's ZX Spectrum Next feature. As for regular Speccy games, we're always partial to a blast on *Jetpac*, and *Where Time Stood Still* is a good shout for a 128K-only game.

FLASH IN THE PAN

Dear **Retro Gamer,**
Since the end of Flash Player is approaching quickly I was thinking you guys could do an article about it, technically it does count as retro because ActionScript released in 1998.
Luca Lagonia

Hi Luca, Flash is definitely on our radar as we have fond memories of games like *Alien Hominid* and *Nanaca Crash*. Keep an eye out for a feature in a future issue.

STEALTH IS OPTIONAL?

Dear Mailbag,
Reading through your magazine, I can't help but feel nostalgic and reminisce about the games that I used to play when I was younger. Do you remember that stealth game, *Stolen*? It was released in 2005 on various platforms, but I'm an avid PlayStation gamer through and through. The game was far from perfect – from its dodgy voice acting to its poorly implemented gameplay. At the time, I thought it was the best game because it was one of the few that I had, and because it had a main female character whom I could relate to. It was the first stealth game for me and this genre has come a long way since then. Personally I don't think it'll die off anytime soon, but what do you think? Are stealth experiences still as impactful as they were to players several years ago?
Jaira Belmonte

We don't remember *Stolen* too well – it came along on the cusp of a generational transition,

» [PC] Reminding us of *Nanaca Crash* very nearly cost us a whole afternoon – we play it compulsively.

» [PS2] *Stolen* wasn't the best game, but Jaira found that the leading lady made it more appealing.

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» [Jaguar] Hopefully this prototype screenshot brings John's quest for understanding to an end.

amid a field of more polished games. However, your fond memories of it demonstrate one of our core beliefs, that even the most unexpected of games can be someone's favourite. As for stealth games, they do seem to be in a bit of a lull right now, with *Splinter Cell* absent and no prospect of *Metal Gear* any time soon. Though *Hitman*'s still out there, maybe it's time for a new series to make an impact?

STUCK IN THE HUD

Hasta luego **Retro Gamer,**
A random bit of trivia popped into my head the other day and reminded me how obsessive and frustrating gaming fandom could be before the dubya dubya dubya dot net… but also how magic that made it.

So my Atari Jaguar box had all these screenshots on it advertising games, one of which was *Alien Vs Predator* which of course was great at the time, despite actually being the gaming equivalent of a slug painted beautifully by HR Giger. Anyway the screenshot featured a different HUD to the finished game and I'm pretty sure a different looking shotgun.

I spent months scouring the game itself, the manual, gaming mags and word of mouth attempting to comfort my raging ten-year-old brain by finding the special weapon and HUD setting. I gave up, only for decades later during a fleeting moment of clarity whilst changing my one year old at 3.00am to realise… it must have been a beta version screenshot.

Two things: please tell me it's true and I'm not going to have to actually scour said internet myself, and please can we get a feature on *Kasumi Ninja*, including all the juicy gore, silly characters and their real life counterparts and the cultural references to it such as the *Gamesmaster* gore special.
John Roy

You may be in luck, John – we've located a prototype screenshot of the game that we printed way back in issue 57. This may well line up with your memories – and if it doesn't, that's another mystery for you! As for *Kasumi Ninja*, we'll bear it in mind for the future.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Christmas games

By the time you read this Christmas will have been and gone, but we're still looking forward to it. Darran is getting *The Last Of Us Part II* for Christmas and prays it will live up to his expectactions. Nick is planning on delving into an exciting new leaked prototype (which you can read about in our next issue), while modding expert Andy is going to use the festive holiday to catch-up on *STALKER Anomaly*, which is set after the main series. New guy Tim is planning to play through as many Games Pass games as possible, but he won't be playing *Control* as "that's rubbish". We hope you had a great one and we'll see you in 2021.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

If you could pick one Neo Geo game or series to be revived for modern hardware, which would it be?

RoryDropkick
Sengoku. Give it a chance to be fleshed out, still with a side scrolling look with spookier vibes and a more complex fighting system for more combos and replay value.

Martin K Dodd
King Of The Monsters. Smashing buildings and fighting a roster of insane looking monsters would be totally awesome on next gen hardware.

Brian Hargrove
2020 Super Baseball. SNK missed the opportunity since it is 2020, maybe 2021.

Bill Mitsis
The Last Blade is long overdue for a sequel. I always felt it's the most elegant and stylish of all the SNK fighting series and it's a massive shame that we only got two of them. Pleeease give us number three!

Andrew Lemon
If someone could revive *Neo Turf Masters* that would be amazing – almost worn out my MVS cart as it's so unbelievably replayable even ages after the original release, a really charming sports title. They also did a lovely job on the NGP version.

Henry Bolaño
Fatal Fury always has been the most iconic series to me. The tale of Terry seeking revenge is timeless and the fall from Geese's skyscraper has seen its fair share of remakes and re-imaginations, but it's never enough!

Mike J Fitzgerald
Neo Geo Cup. An arcade styled football-'em-up would probably find an audience with the *Rocket League* crowd.

Jamie Martin
Metal Slug. The thought of seeing your player getting heavier in 3D graphics after eating food would be hilarious.

Mays Adam
A *Samurai Shodown* RPG remake would be fantastic, we never really had any official translation for this title.

retro GAMER

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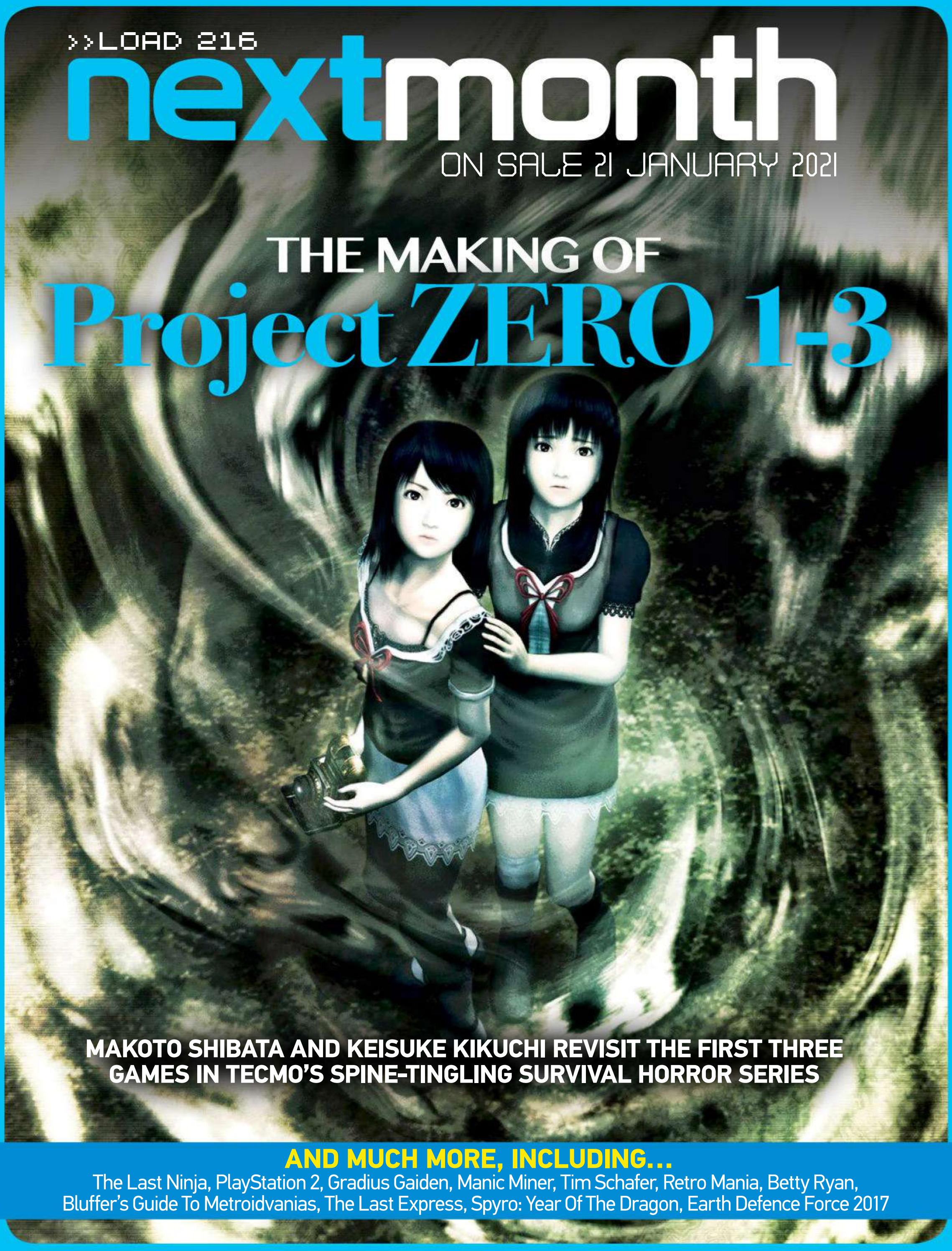

THE MAKING OF Project ZERO 1-3

MAKOTO SHIBATA AND KEISUKE KIKUCHI REVISIT THE FIRST THREE GAMES IN TECMO'S SPINE-TINGLING SURVIVAL HORROR SERIES

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ENDGAME

3D TETRIS

» Honestly, what sort of ending are you supposed to come up with when you're making a *Tetris* game? The Game Boy version already got the cool rocket launches. Well, what if the developer made a cool 3D engine and then just decided to mess about with it in the end sequence? That's just what happened in this obscure Virtual Boy game, so let's have a look at what T&E Soft came up with...

01

» This one's meant to be a snake. We suppose you can't do much about the shape of a snake, but this particular model does feel like a bit of a cop out when it comes to the whole 'cool 3D model' thing. What else have you got?

02

» Sunglasses, so I am reliably informed. These have probably been left at the scene by Crimer, who clearly stole the real sunglasses and has left this dreadful imitation pair for us to gawp at like a bunch of chumps.

03

» OK, this one's a bit better as you can clearly see that it's supposed to be a dog. We're not sure of the breed, but it's probably a puppy based on the fact that it is jumping about and rolling around on the floor. Good, er, boy?

04

» Now this is more like it, heavy machinery! We like these sorts of things because they remind us of *Power Diggerz*, a PlayStation game that sounds like it should be dreadful but isn't. You can save turtles with an industrial excavator! You can serve curry! Be as excited as we are, you guys!

05

» This one's good too, because it's an elephant. They say that elephants never forget, which is why you know it's a personal slight when they refuse to send you a birthday card. It's also highly unfortunate for Nintendo, as we're sure it would rather nobody remembered the Virtual Boy. Elephants do, though.

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